

## Another wake-up call amid raging floods

Urgent humanitarian aid needed in flood-hit northeast

WE'RE deeply worried about the deteriorating flood situation in the north-eastern region of Bangladesh which comes hard on the heels of a flash flood that hit the region weeks ago. This time, the crisis is unfolding on a larger scale. Most of Sylhet and Sunamganj districts have reportedly gone under water. New areas are being inundated at a pace that has surprised many, with as many as 17 districts now feared to be in danger. The flood was triggered on Wednesday by heavy rains and water flowing from upstream India's Meghalaya and Assam, where record-breaking rainfall was recorded.

In Sylhet and Sunamganj, where the situation is particularly dire, more than 40 lakh people are said to have been marooned. Power connection has been cut off after all sub-stations in the districts were submerged by water. As time passes, the cry for rescue and relief is getting louder. Many flood-hit areas remain unreachable due to the high tide of water, despite efforts from Bangladesh Army and Navy which are helping with the rescue operations. The scenes of struggle and devastation emerging from these areas are disturbing, to say the least.

Experts say that a number of reasons combined to make the situation worse, including the absence of a flood protection embankment in Sunamganj, earth-filling in haor and other water bodies, deforestation in the hills, as well as mining in the upstream Indian areas. Many structures built occupying the water bodies – which traditionally served as reservoirs holding the excess water from floods – are disrupting the flow of water and preventing it from receding. This should be another wake up call for us as flooding increasingly becomes the most common climate-related risk to Bangladesh. The question is, what measures are being taken to reduce the risk of such floods?

Right now, the priority is to rescue the stranded people and deliver relief and medicine in the most-affected areas. We're told that the situation may not improve immediately as heavy rains are expected to continue. This is bad news. The local administration should brace for a harder time and assess its preparedness. All schools and colleges on higher ground should be urgently prepared to accommodate the rising number of people requiring shelters, with sufficient provisions for food and medical aid. Power connection should be restored as soon as possible. Care should also be taken so that there is no food crisis in the districts. All state agencies in the affected areas should be geared toward the purpose of helping with the flood situation. Equally importantly, the authorities should look at the bigger picture and start devising ways to reduce, as much as possible, the risk of such floods in the future.

## Shouldn't student bodies be led by students?

Creating new political leadership will be a distant dream otherwise

WE are concerned at the undemocratic way that student organisations affiliated with various political parties are being run. More often than not, the central committees of these organisations are led by those whose studentship has long expired. According to a report in this daily, the top positions of these bodies are hardly held by regular students. At present, both president and general secretary positions at the central committees of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) are occupied by non-students. Reportedly, student wings of various left-leaning political parties are also being run in the same way. Even the Dhaka University (DU) units of these organisations are led by those whose studentship has expired. The only exception seems to be the Samajtantrik Chhatra Front in DU, where the two top posts are held by regular students.

This situation is worrying because non-students holding these positions can hardly be true representatives of ordinary students. They can neither understand the gravity of the problems facing students, nor are particularly interested in solving those. What we have seen in most cases is that these student bodies work to implement the agenda of their parent organisations. Often they are engaged in various horrendous activities on campus, including seat trade. More importantly, the culture of keeping non-students at the top positions is creating a void in our political leadership since it needs a continuous process of electing new leadership in the student organisations to create new leaders in national politics.

We also do not understand why the leaders of these student bodies have to be selected by their parent organisations. Shouldn't the student members of the organisations elect their own leaders? This trend reflects a lack of democratic culture within the student bodies.

Although this has been a fact for the majority of our student organisations for years now, the issue has come to the limelight again after a recent incident where the BCL activists barred JCD activists from entering the DU campus alleging that they were not students. Some of the student leaders have told us that their organisations are run according to their parties' constitutions. If that is so, shouldn't their parent political parties bring a change to their constitutions in this regard? It's only reasonable to expect that student organisations would be led by students. If that can be ensured, we can expect to see the beginning of a positive change in the political environment of our higher educational institutions.

# Dire lessons from the Cumilla City Corporation election



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THE just completed Cumilla City Corporation election was a "test case" for the newly formed Awal Commission. The EC deployed a large number of magistrates and law enforcement personnel and installed CCTV cameras to ensure free, fair and peaceful election in Cumilla. Consequently, the election was violence free, although not free from chaos, confusion and drama.

The experience of the Cumilla City Corporation election raises two serious questions relating to: (a) the capability and competence of the EC; and (b) the appropriateness of using EVMs in future elections.

During the campaign period, the EC issued a directive under section 22 of the "Code of Conduct" asking the sitting MP, AKM Bahauddin Bahar, who was residing within the city corporation, to leave the area. Mr Bahar failed to comply, and as far as we know, such defiance never happened before. In response, the CEC said that the EC could not do anything about it, although section 31 and 32 of the Code of Conduct clearly specify penalties for such violation, including the imposition of fines, jail sentence and even cancellation of the candidature of the candidate supported by the MP. One of the commissioners went further to say that the EC could not "dishonour" an "honourable" person – though the commission previously cancelled the candidatures of a Paurashava and several UP chairmen, who are small furies, and even postponed elections for such violations.

Clearly, the EC failed to enforce the electoral law, as a result of which one MP got away by defying the Code of Conduct. More worryingly, the CEC and the other commissioners appear to have helplessly surrendered their authority and even failed to "faithfully discharge the duties of the 'office according to law'. Can the citizens remain unalarmed when the members of an independent constitutional body fail to obey their oath of office?

The Awal Commission will have to conduct the 12th Parliamentary election in 18 months, which could potentially cause the transfer of power. In that election, many of the 300 MPs, several thousand other candidates, thousands of members of the bureaucracy and law enforcement – many of whom have partisan bents – and political party activists will desperately try to influence the results. If the Awal Commission could not compel one MP to abide by the law, how will it be able to do so during the national election, when there will be lot more pressure from many



▲ The Cumilla City Corporation election was the first election overseen by the new Election Commission.

PHOTO: SHAHIDUL HASAN ROMAN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

powerful quarters? In addition, in the national election, the EC will not have so many magistrates and law enforcement personnel to deploy, and those deployed may also not act neutrally.

Regarding the use of EVM, the Cumilla City Corporation election once more established that the biometrics-based EVM currently in use suppresses voting. It may

the 2018 election, the election officials were allowed to override the EVM in up to 25 percent of the cases. Because of these technical limitations, the late Professor Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, as the head of the technical advisory committee, formed by the EC, refused to sign the recommendation to buy the EVM without the VVPAT. It may be noted in the last



be recalled that in the 11th parliamentary election, the turnout rate was 80.80 percent in 294 constituencies, where paper ballots were used, whereas the turnout rate was 51.54 percent in six constituencies that used EVMs, representing a 30 percent difference. This is a dramatic evidence of voter suppression.

Even in the Cumilla City Corporation election, the voter turnout declined because of the use of the biometrics-based EVMs. In 2012, when nonbiometrics-based EVMs were used, the turnout rate was 75 percent. In 2017, when paper ballots were used, the turnout rate was 63.92 percent. By contrast, the turnout rate in the recent election was 58.74 percent, a 16 percent decline from 2012 and about 5 percent less than 2017. Many Cumilla voters were reported to have been unhappy about the slowness of the voting and some even left without voting. How can one justify using machines in voting when they prevent voters from exercising their right of franchise?

Another serious concern about the use of EVM arises from its technical limitations. The pandemonium and drama staged during the declaration of the results and the controversy about the final results of the mayoral election were due to these technical limitations, which make the EVM susceptible to digital manipulation. The EVM does not have the "voter verifiable paper audit trail" (VVPAT), because of which results declared by the election officials are final, and they cannot be audited or verified through recounting. In other words, the dependability of the EVM depends largely on the so-called "men behind the machine" as the election officials are given the authority to override the EMV. According to a BBC report, in

Chattogram City Corporation election, the results were declared twice, indicating digital manipulation.

Let us now focus on the drama created by the disruption of the declaration of the results. When the results of 101 centres were declared, Monirul Haque had 48,492 votes compared to 47,863 votes for Arfanul Haque – a difference of 629 votes. At that point, the Returning Officer stopped the declaration of the results of the mayoral contest because he did not have, by his own admission, the results of the remaining centres (Prothom Alo, June 16, 2022). Surprisingly, the results of those four centres came in about four hours after closing of the polling, although they should have been available to the Presiding Officers with the mere pressing of a few buttons.

What is even more surprising is that the results of those four remaining centres caused a dramatic turnaround of 972 votes, causing Arfanul Haque to win by 343 votes, whereas he was losing by 629 votes based on the results of 101 centres. It must be a miraculous coincidence that Arfanul Haque had such a vote bank in the four centres whose results were reported last, allowing him to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

Monirul Haque raised the allegation that he was defeated through manipulation. But because of the technical limitation of not having VVPAT in the EVM used, his allegation could not be proved or disproved either way. It may be noted that under the direction of the Indian Supreme Court, the EC there had to add VVPAT to their EVMs. Many countries, including technologically advanced ones, have been abandoning the use of EVMs because of the complications they create.

Can the citizens remain unalarmed when the members of an independent constitutional body fail to obey their oath of office?

## Can Bangladesh-Myanmar military ties stabilise the region?

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A power shift in Myanmar and the subsequent polarisation among major powers triggered a new geopolitical flashpoint in Bangladesh's strategic backyard, which the latter cannot afford to ignore. It seems that the US and other western countries are taking a heavy-handed approach while other big powers, such as Russia, China, India, and Japan, have started explicitly (or covertly) normalising their relations with the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military).

Myanmar always gets priority in Bangladesh's economic and security strategy. Although democratic Bangladesh has a moral dilemma in supporting the military government, it has yet to formally condemn the military coup or demand Aung San Su Kyi's release. It underscores Dhaka's careful support for the junta's "one-Myanmar government policy." So, in foreign policy circles, the immediate discussion is whether Dhaka's stance is a "well-thought-out approach or simply a premature polarisation."

In depth analysis suggests that Bangladesh's stance has stemmed from some very specific strategic considerations. First, Bangladesh is well aware that sanctions and condemnation, a typical western practice, are counterproductive in Myanmar as long as China and Russia continue to extend their diplomatic and military shields. Second, the previous NLD government failed to facilitate Dhaka's long expected connectivity, border security, or Rohingya crisis issues. Third, Dhaka seeks to develop cosy relations with Myanmar's army based on non-

confrontational and non-interference approach. So, it doesn't want to enrage the Tatmadaw by taking part in a smear campaign that would not even address the country's core security concerns.

Given the rapidly changing geo-political dynamics, it is not a surprise to predict that major powers like China, India, Russia, and Japan will remain on Myanmar's military side, underlining their own strategic narratives. It will undoubtedly give the military a chance to consolidate its grip on the country as well as its diplomatic status and military position. With a recent resumption in diplomatic exchanges, China is warming up its historical "Pauk-Phaw" (sibling) ties with Myanmar. It has begun to normalise relations with the State Administration Council, mainly to secure its strategic infrastructure projects that would give Beijing a vital gateway to the Indian Ocean. Despite the fact that Russia, one of Myanmar's largest arms suppliers, has no pressing geostrategic imperatives in Myanmar, it has been trying to diversify its cooperation with the country to increase its investment portfolio. Besides, the China-Russia alliance is expected to play a more active role in the centre of the Indo-Pacific to offset expanding western dominance. Although India and Japan, two QUAD allies, feel uncomfortable doing business with a military regime, they will avoid the West-centric coercive measures and instead follow a "twin-track diplomacy" to engage with military administrations as well as pro-democracy forces. Apparently, the key strategic reason for this stance is to avoid alienating Myanmar and pushing it further towards China.

Finding an early and sustainable solution to the Rohingya crisis is a "top priority" issue for Bangladesh right now. But policy analysts acknowledge

that this protracted issue has become more complicated and would require a "consultative and constructive approach" between the two governments, along with international stakeholders. Thus, Bangladesh would have to deal with the Myanmar military even if it is governed by people's representatives because the 2008 Constitution places the military in a central position in the government with complete authority over the ministries of defence, home, and border affairs. Another main strategic objective of Bangladesh is to materialise its look-east policy by connecting itself with China and the ASEAN countries via Myanmar. Bangladesh has also been eyeing joining the ASEAN bloc and the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway initiative. Therefore, Bangladesh ought to convince Myanmar's central government to draw up plans for access to each other's markets as well as regional markets to face the post-LDC challenges.

Despite past strained ties, Bangladesh's military chiefs have traditionally paid goodwill visits to Myanmar, seeking to develop a more meaningful relationship from a security standpoint. What is important to note is that Bangladesh was among only eight countries that sent their defence attaché to the Myanmar Armed Forces Day parade in Naypyidaw in March 2021, a month after the coup, prompting Min Aung Hlaing to consider Dhaka as one of its allies. In a nutshell, Bangladesh is trying to reorient its Myanmar policy in light of the regional power setting and the army's new rule in Naypyidaw. Pursuing a multi-dimensional approach of engagement with the Myanmar government and convincing them to address security concerns could be a viable strategic option for Bangladesh right now.