

MESSAGE FROM CUMILLA ELECTIONS

# Time for soul-searching



Mohammad Al-Masum Molla is deputy chief reporter at The Daily Star.

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

FROM a small village-level local government election to the larger parliamentary polls, every election is a learning opportunity – that’s the beauty of a working democracy. The recently concluded Cumilla City Corporation election was no different. Now, it’s completely up to the stakeholders – the Election Commission (EC), the contending political parties, the voters, the observers, etc. – to decide what they are going to do with these “lessons”, whether they’re going to do anything differently the next time, or make the same mistakes again.

Interestingly, the only stakeholder that seems to be making decisions based on these lessons are the voters. In the last city corporation polls in Cumilla 10 years ago, over seven out of every 10 voters turned up to vote. This time, the turnout was less than 60 percent.

Although six out of 10 is still quite high in the national context, it is quite low for Cumilla. This decrease could be a reflection of the general voters’ fast-depleting trust in the election process. It could be that they don’t have confidence in the EC to ensure a level-playing field for all the contestants or that their votes would make any difference in determining the final result.

In all fairness, the “rookie” commissioners assumed office at a time when the EC’s credibility is in ruins. None of the ECs in the past decade has managed to hold free and fair elections, barring a few stray ones. With this massive baggage, the Cumilla city poll was truly the first real test of character for the EC.

The EC was turned into a laughing stock when the local ruling party



lawmaker blatantly ignored its order to stay out of the city before and during the election, and the EC did absolutely nothing to enforce it. So, we will have to wait and see what the EC does to recover from this embarrassment.

The Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibul Awal said that the EC cannot do anything against a lawmaker if he “dishonours” the commission’s directives. But that is not true. If the commission thinks that someone’s interference can hamper the holding of a free and fair election, the commission can postpone it.

Former election commissioner Brigadier General (retd) M Sakawat Hossain said that during the first election in Cumilla in 2012, when a minister went to the election area, the commission, through the returning officer, sent a message that if the minister did not leave the area within an hour, the election

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would be postponed. The minister then left the area.

The failure by this commission to take such a bold step raises the question: If the EC cannot control one lawmaker, how will it control 300 lawmakers in the next parliamentary polls? The last-minute drama over the announcement of the election result also raised questions over its competency to hold fair polls.

The Awami League and BNP also have major takeaways from the election. For the BNP, the lesson is crystal clear: The party cannot afford to lose elections by allowing its local level leaders to “cannibalise” each other. For the ruling AL, it’s a major wakeup call ahead of next year’s national elections. Although the AL barely escaped with a close victory in Cumilla this year because the opposition tent was not united, it’s a clear indication that the anti-incumbency factor is very much in effect now.

Although the election was partisan in nature, the ruling AL candidate contested the election with the party symbol, while his main contender, expelled BNP leader Monirul Haque Sakku, contested it with the clock symbol. This gave Rifat an upper hand.

The AL candidate got around 38 percent of the total votes cast. Usually, it is estimated that AL has around 40 percent of votes in the country. In that sense, AL’s vote bank remained almost intact even after staying in office for the last 13 years at a stretch. But the party could not bag the floating votes, and it is probably because of the anti-incumbency factor. So, AL needs to think about the floating votes if it really wants to compete in the upcoming national elections. Otherwise, it will face a serious setback in the next polls.

On the other hand, although BNP boycotted the election, two of its leaders contested the polls and together got around 80,000 votes. The BNP candidates lost as their votes were split. But they bagged around 60 percent of the votes. The BNP’s vote bank is estimated to be less than 40 percent. So, the result showed that it got the votes of the floating voters.

The lesson for BNP is that if it can choose the proper candidates and remain on the field till the last minute of the polls, it has a good chance in the next elections. But again, a good election is not entirely dependent on the BNP. The election result also showed that AL’s votes did not increase – rather its candidate won the polls by taking advantage of the vote split of the two expelled BNP candidates.

The most important factor that drew my attention was the lack of festivity and enthusiasm over voting. In recent times, almost all the local government elections were one-sided. And many of the times, those who were elected won the elections uncontested. Even in Cumilla polls, two ward councillors were elected uncontested. That is perhaps why people have lost trust in the electoral system.

## Stateless refugees and the calculus of human worth



Naushad Ali Husein works in the development sector. Email: naushad.ali.husein@gmail.com

NAUSHAD ALI HUSEIN

WE depend on oversimplified narratives to help us come to terms with our existence. That we are the most developed living organism on Earth. That this is the result of a linear evolution from the simplest, insentient, single-cell amoeba to the intelligent and cultured beings we now are. That this linear progress continues as societies grow more advanced and sophisticated.

And we believe in our modern global political system of nation-states. But we pledge allegiance to our country, and we feel bound to be loyal to the squiggly lines that define them. We ignore how arbitrarily that border was drawn out.

Certainly, that border is an undeniable truth, an irreversible sleight of history. But this neat and simple narrative of belonging complicates our humanity grossly. It leaves long complex equations in a murky calculus determining which lives matter and how much.

It starts off simple enough: Our own above others’. Our state shall value its citizens, language, heritage, etc. above any other citizens, language or heritage. Each person’s dignity and rights shall be protected by the state of which they are a citizen.

But no country is homogenous, and the nationalist sentiment has to make choices and compromises. The constitution privileges all citizens, regardless of the language they speak – but clearly positions Bangla as the state language, not Kokborok or Hajong (“Coke Studio Bangla” notwithstanding).

Then there are citizens whose ancestors are straight-up immigrants. Foreign people with a Bangladeshi passport. The worth of this breed is not dependent on any one variable. Melanin, for example, seems to be inversely related to worth. The level of exoticism of their origin is directly related to their worth. If they speak the “enemy language,” Urdu, their worth is automatically negative.

Then there’s religion. Islam has a special place in our state and constitution, and even that is a bit inconvenient to everybody who isn’t a Muslim. But Muslims get plenty of flack elsewhere in

the world. You add a little on one side of the equation, subtract a little on the other, and it all balances out, no? Positive humanity versus negative humanity.

And let’s not forget money and influence. These are the most important determinants of a person’s worth.

Then there are... well, the aliens. The “forcibly displaced,” rendered stateless by a genocidal regime, with no squiggly lines to safely call their own, therefore permanently seeking temporary refuge within ours. What value do we assign their lives, as opposed to our own? And how do we calculate this value? And who is responsible for appreciating it? Must it be the country of “first arrival”? But then what responsibility does the global community have?

Yes, the calculus of human worth gets super convoluted the moment we start talking about stateless refugees. Take the Rohingya people, whom Bangladesh has been absorbing for decades. Many Rohingya people who arrived as early as in the 1970s became naturalised. Then there were those who used to cross the border at will – after all, it’s just a river that they had to cross – and never bothered to make the papers. So now we have more variables in our equation: Who arrived when, and who has what papers.

This year, for the first time in human history, there are more than 100 million people around the world forcibly displaced by war, persecution, and disaster. Of these, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine accounts for 14 million.

The way the international community has responded to the Ukraine crisis proves beyond doubt that the people of this world have humanity and compassion in them. But this compassion is selective. On the Polish border, African students and non-white refugees reported being made to wait in freezing temperatures while busloads of white Ukrainians were let in ahead of them.

Ukrainian refugees who look like Ukrainians – to put it crassly – have been welcomed all over Europe and the developed world. The EU, which has spent decades trying to repel refugees from all over the world, often in inhuman and lethal ways, moved quickly to adopt a Temporary Protection Directive to allow Ukrainian refugees to access healthcare and jobs.

The UK launched the Homes for Ukraine scheme to settle Ukrainian refugees, while simultaneously making arrangements to ship all other asylum-seekers to offshore detention centres. The US is hand-picking Ukrainians to



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PHOTO: REUTERS

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cross into its territory from Mexico, leaving behind the Mexicans trying to escape drug wars. It’s also writing the EU a billion-dollar cheque to absorb Ukrainian refugees. (And let’s not forget the weapons.)

There’s a whole calculus about good refugees and bad refugees, and how many of which must be welcomed where. In 2015, with the ISIS crisis raging, it took the picture of a dead five-year-old washed up on a beach to provoke sympathy for Syrian refugees. That year, 1.3 million refugees entered the EU. In the past several years, hundreds of thousands have entered the EU, but with plenty of fuss.

In the last four months, six million Ukrainians have been accepted with open arms into Europe. There are reasons why other refugees are not accepted as openly.

Bangladeshis attempting to cross the Mediterranean into Italy weren’t even considered refugees, because escaping hopelessness doesn’t count as fleeing anything. Then the problem with these “economic” migrants is that they don’t integrate or embrace the European lifestyle. It’s rumoured they have plenty of children to maximise welfare payments. They lack sophistication. Let’s be honest, we all use this variable in our human worth calculations.

When talking about progress, we like to think we have evolved. That, unlike times past, the modern world is one

where everyone agrees on and believes in the sanctity and dignity of human life, and all the leaders of the world have signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) to this effect:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

This is an incredibly radical statement, and I’m surprised so many important people agreed to it. There’s nothing here that says our brotherhood should be reserved for our countrymen, or that the less sophisticated are less equal. There’s nothing here about belonging to any arbitrarily drawn lines. “All human beings are born free and equal”? Lofty ideal.

It’s not a natural tendency for human beings to unconditionally love each other. “Love thy neighbour” was a radical message and not without reason. If we loved them all equally, we probably wouldn’t survive long. But tying our identities and loyalties to the nation-state means that our love and respect for fellow humans (and other life forms) are subject to a complex calculus full of arbitrary variables – complexion, documentation, wealth, language, sophistication.

Love and respect for the entire human family, and for all life on the planet, is behaviour that must be learned. Can you imagine it as the next step in human progress?