

Why should we trust EVMs?

EC has failed to assure the people that EVMs will not lead to electoral fraud

IN June, many had described the Cumilla City Corporation elections as a "trial run" for the Election Commission's competence in organising polls, especially in terms of using electronic voting machines (EVMs). The results, unfortunately, left much to be desired. Not only did the EC fail to enforce electoral law when a local MP defied its code of conduct, but there was a great deal of controversy around the use of EVMs as well, leading to pandemonium during the declaration of results. The chaos surrounded the fact that there was no mechanism to audit or verify the results, or to question the influence of election officials operating the machines, regardless of how dubious said results might seem.

Civil society organisations are continuing to raise such concerns to this day. According to SHUJAN: Citizens for Good Governance, there is a huge lack of transparency surrounding EVMs, especially the audit cards via which election results are collected, and which can be tampered with in the absence of a voter-verifiable paper audit trail. There are also confusions over whether EVM software can be manipulated. Beyond that, there are worries that the provision for EVM overwrite by election officials – where the presiding officer is allowed to use the ballot when there are issues with the EVM registering fingerprints – could also be used to manipulate election results.

These concerns have been repeated by opposition political parties as well. However, we have not seen the EC take any concrete steps to set their minds at ease. In fact, the EC has declared that EVMs will be used in around 150 constituencies in the next general election. This will require the use of around 5 lakh audit cards, meaning it will be impossible to find the time and resources to run forensic analysis on such a huge number of cards to ensure they are not tampered with. On what scientific basis did the EC decide on using EVMs? And how does it answer the questions being raised about its independence?

The EC has claimed it will do everything to ensure free and fair elections. To this end, it has even held dialogues with opposition parties, but the decision regarding EVMs makes clear that their demands were taken lightly. Over the past week, we have also witnessed BNP rallies in multiple districts being systematically attacked by ruling party men, sometimes with the help of police. Does the EC still believe this is a conducive environment for free elections? And if not, what does it intend to do about it?

It is up to the EC to ensure that the people are able to cast their votes. Against the backdrop of increasing election violence and political repression, choosing a system of voting that has been roundly described by experts as dampening voter turnout is yet another wrong decision from an increasingly long list curated by the EC.

Why does BR keep floundering?

It should critically examine and fix its systemic problems

OUR experience with railway projects is nothing to write home about. The railway has seen more than its fair share of projects to flounder, thanks to flawed project designs, weak feasibility studies, delays in preliminary work, procurement, activating funds, etc. Some of the projects were stalled indefinitely as well. Clearly, Bangladesh Railway (BR) has an execution problem, and it has been getting worse, as revealed by a recent report by *The Daily Star*. The report describes how another project plunged into uncertainty after the authorities put it on hold following a decision to not take hard loan from a Chinese contractor/financier, as originally planned.

Reportedly, the project was taken up in October 2016 to procure 200 rail carriages in a bid to improve the BR's capacity. It was supposed to be implemented with funds arranged by a certain Chinese contractor, and a contract was signed to that effect in November 2018. Out of the total project cost of Tk 927.52 crore, the government was supposed to pay Tk 214 crore while the remaining Tk 713.52 crore was supposed to come from the financier arranged by the contractor. However, things took an unexpected turn because of procedural delays and lack of preparation and cooperation on both sides. The cancellation of the contract means that BR will have to start the process all over again, having already lost six years and Tk 84.51 lakh in its initial bid.

This is, however, not the first time that poor preparatory work has led to the cancellation of a railway project. Early last year, the Chinese government informed Bangladesh that it would not fund the Joydebpur-Ishwardi double-line construction project because of "a lack of in-depth preliminary work and insufficient feasibility study". Besides, the Chinese contractor for the Akhaura-Sylhet rail line expansion project also declined to work after a downward revision of project costs.

Something always seems to go wrong when the railway authorities execute a project. Either it is bureaucratic deadweight affecting the process from start to finish, or the feasibility study is weak, or there is a problem with funding or procurement, or some other systemic failure. Inefficiency, mismanagement and corruption – these form a routine combination that either stalls projects, makes them insanely expensive, or compromises their outcomes. After the latest debacle, we cannot help but ask: can we ever expect timely project executions from the railway authorities? When will they stop giving excuses for projects gone wrong, and start proving their worth to the public?

We urge the authorities to critically examine why their projects keep getting delayed or stalled. They must establish accountability in all their undertakings, and fix systemic loopholes plaguing them for long.

The politicisation of police



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MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

IT would be foolish to think that it was the first time that a police officer had been insolent towards an elected representative. But it was because the heated argument between Barguna lawmaker Dharendra Debnath, who is also the president of Awami League's Barguna unit, and Barguna's Additional Police Superintendent Moharram Ali went viral on social media that people are taking notice of such an incident.

Police have been used regularly to muzzle the opposition in Bangladesh – and beyond – since time immemorial. But this happens to be a rare instance when the police appear to have turned on someone from the ruling party.

To discuss the impropriety of such behaviour from an employee of public service towards an elected representative is an exercise in futility. We will try to understand the possible reasons behind the police officer's

The ruling political class has come to increasingly rely on our law enforcers, rather than on their own strength that stems from public support and political currency. But this dependency on law enforcers to reign over the opposition and rule politically backfires almost invariably. With the last two general elections being questioned, people's distrust of the politicians has only increased.

audacity, and whether it was the reflection of a systemic shift in the mindset of the bureaucracy or just one police officer being insolent towards a ruling party leader. The bureaucracy knows that the ruling political camp



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does not have the currency or moral support to rightfully govern this country and must depend on them.

Over the years, the ruling party's dependency on not just the police, but also the entire bureaucracy, to govern in general, corner the opposition, and suppress dissent has basically emboldened law enforcers. The ruling political class has come to increasingly rely on our law enforcers, rather than on their own strength that stems from public support and political currency.

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With the last two general elections being questioned, people's distrust of the politicians has only increased. The politicians have also become alienated from voters, because there are now easier ways to win elections – using the administration and law enforcement agencies. Law enforcers know how the lawmakers have been elected, and how strong they are. But the ruling government, perhaps in order to ensure the subservience and

obedience of the law enforcement agencies and bureaucracy, has been on a spree to politicise them, sometimes enthusiastically recruiting party cadres and sympathisers.

Thus, the audacity the police personnel was showing was nothing but the result of the politicisation of police.

We have to acknowledge the fact

reform is imperative if police are to act independently."

But for the politicisation of police, the ruling party should not be blamed alone. We have seen over the years how various governments assumed power and used the police for their own interests. The situation has reached a point where it has become difficult to find a government that used the

police primarily in the interest of public service, instead of to serve the interests of the ruling government and the ruling party. We have a number of examples where the police were used to serve the interests of individuals.

So, in some cases, it has become tough to distinguish between the roles of political leaders and police officers. But in an ideal situation, political leaders were supposed to lay down the policy guidelines, and the police were supposed to execute the decisions within the framework of law.

Politicisation of police is detrimental to democracy and damages the basic structure of governance. So, the audacity that a police official has shown towards a sitting lawmaker is nothing but the result of their alienation from the people and the politicisation of police.

Politicians must rely on their own strength to govern the country. If they fail to do so, and rely on the law enforcers or the administration, then no one but the politicians will pay the most, and consequently, the nation will, too.

Some coincidences are akin to death traps



CHINTITO SINCE 1995

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NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

ON July 29, the Mahanagar Provati Express started from Dhaka for Chattogram. Unrelated until the tragedy, students and teachers of R&J Coaching Centre in Hathazari started towards Khoiyachhara Waterfall in a microbus, their touristic destination being Chattogram's Mirsarai upazila. No mortal knew that the two vehicles would meet at 1:30pm at Khoiyachhara level crossing with tragic consequences.

Eleven passengers of the microbus, including seven students, were killed in the collision, as the train, before decelerating, dragged it for a kilometre along the track. Six persons were severely injured.

The on-duty guard at the crossing had gone to offer his Jumma prayers, leaving the converging vehicles at the mercy of destiny, although he claimed he had lowered the boom barriers on both sides of the track. It may have been his regular practice. Was it a coincidence on that fateful Friday? Or neglect of duty by the gateman?

In a further twist of fate, according to the Bangladesh Railway (BR) authorities, after a train from Chattogram had crossed the gate, and assuming the coast was clear and therefore safe, the passengers of the microbus ill-advisedly and perilously lifted the boom barriers. As the microbus resumed its journey, the



More than ever before, the Mirsarai misfortune highlights the need for trained gatekeepers with adequate pay. PHOTO: MOHAMMAD SUMAN

Mahanagar Provati arrived and hit the microbus. Was it a coincidence? Or a lack of citizens' responsibility?

In performing his religious obligation, the guard, now under arrest, ignored his duty as prescribed in Islam. Islam, like perhaps all religions, lays importance on duty. Work is *ibadah*, i.e. worship. "If one makes the intention to seek a *halal rizq* (sustenance) that is pleasing to Allah, then his/her work becomes an act of worship which the individual is

rewarded for."

Namaz is a part of a Muslim's normal daily routine. It is a Muslim's duty to God. One should not make prayers an issue to neglect one's duty. This happens in our offices and factories. Some of us take unusually long breaks for namaz.

In order to accommodate duties and chores of life, Islam has a system of

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The BR, as well as the roads and highways authorities, should survey every level crossing across the country to assess traffic flow capacity. If vehicles cross a railway track regularly, stringent structural and supervisory safety measures must be put in place. Constructing overpasses at busy city and municipal level crossings will improve the situation. More than ever before, the Mirsarai misfortune highlights the need for trained gatekeepers with adequate pay.