

'Decision to use EVMs defies all logic'

Badiul Alam Majumdar, secretary of Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan), talks about the controversy surrounding the Election Commission's decision to use EVMs, despite widespread opposition to the idea, in an interview with Mohiuddin Alamgir of The Daily Star.

The Election Commission (EC) has decided to use electronic voting machines (EVMs) at 150 constituencies out of the 300 in the next general election, ignoring the BNP and several other political parties' objection to EVM use. The EC has also decided to purchase 200,000 new EVMs. What are your thoughts on this?

This decision defies all logic. Spending about Tk 9,000 crore is illogical when the country is going through an economic crisis, and when we are trying to get a loan of around USD 7 billion. Many people and political parties are protesting the decision as well. What is particularly concerning is that they are going to spend money on technologically flawed machines. It is possible to manipulate the election results through the EVMs. The machine has no Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT), a system that dispenses a slip with the symbol of the party for which an individual has voted. Late Dr Jamilur Reza Choudhury, who was appointed as the chief of the technical advisory committee on EVMs, protested the move of buying them as they don't have VVPAT. In India, VVPAT has been added to EVMs following a court order.

There is no scope for a vote recount if an election is held using these EVMs. The people will have to accept whatever the EC announces as the final result. Biometric-based EVMs, in many cases, cannot identify fingerprints of elderly voters, or if one's fingers get damaged because of their work patterns. The presiding officer and assistant presiding officer have overriding power in case a voter's fingerprint does not match with the data stored in the server.

According to a BBC report, in the last election, in as many as 25 percent of the cases, presiding officers and assistant presiding officers employed their overriding power. It was reported that these election officials were partisan, and

were appointed only after being verified by police. As they have the power to open a machine, they can even cast votes when voters are absent. How much of this overriding power was used? Who will oversee that, and where is the transparency? Even 5-10 percent cases of officials employing this overriding capacity can be a determining factor in the election results.

The EC often claims that no one can prove the EVMs are not secure.

That is incorrect. If you provide us with an EVM machine and the proprietary source code, we will be able to prove how the manipulation is possible.

But will a manufacturer share the proprietary source code with others?

Indeed, a manufacturer will not share the proprietary source code with others. But how else will we prove that vote manipulation is possible through EVMs? Take

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Germany's case for an example. A German court in its judgment on EVMs said that the principle of the public nature of elections, as per Germany's Basic Law, requires that all essential steps in the elections be subject to public examinability, unless other constitutional interests



Badiul Alam Majumdar

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justify an exception. The court said that the proceedings for the examination of the type sample by the Physikalisch-Technische Bundesanstalt – the national metrology institute of Germany – and approval by the Ministry of the Interior should be public as part of election preparations. Any interest of the manufacturer in protecting its business secrets should be subordinate to the principle of democracy. In order to check the devices independently, disclosure of the control documents, reports of Physikalisch-Technische Bundesanstalt, and of the source code of the EVM software is the only way to be able to judge the integrity of the elections. Not disclosing this information is said to constitute an electoral error.

So, without the source code, we cannot prove that manipulation of the machines is possible.

The BNP has been saying that

they will not take part in the next general election. The EC is saying that they cannot and will not compel any party to join the polls. Can the Commission make such a statement?

We don't want just a participatory election; we want a competitive, free, fair, and credible election. The EC is an independent constitutional body and its responsibility is to hold free and fair elections. When a large political party or several parties refrain from participating in elections, it cannot be called a proper election. Elections mean choosing between alternatives. The EC cannot get away by saying that they wouldn't compel anyone to join the polls. The EC has enormous power, according to Mahmudul Islam's book *Constitutional Law of Bangladesh*; it has the inherent power to ensure a free and fair election. In the face of a boycott, the EC must tell the ruling party and others that it cannot meet its constitutional obligation to hold a

participatory election.

The EC cannot ensure free and fair elections by itself if the law enforcement agencies and the administration are partisan, and the ruling party acts aggressively. But it has the power to prevent rigged elections, provide remedies and cancel the elections after probes when needed.

Even though some political parties, including the BNP, are in favour of a poll-time government for a participatory and credible election, the EC has not yet recommended this in their working plan for the next election, saying it does not fall under their jurisdiction.

We think the issue of caretaker government does fall under the EC's jurisdiction, as their mandate is to hold free, fair, and credible elections. Again, regarding the caretaker government, the EC can tell the government that they cannot meet

their constitutional obligation to hold free, fair and credible elections without it, because that would not be consistent with the constitution.

Members of the opposition parties are facing police attacks whenever they try to hold a rally or a meeting. Do you think such attacks would further widen the existing political division between the opposition and the ruling party?

It is not just about the widening of political division. This would create the scope for an election full of fraudulence as well. The current events may lead to members of the opposition parties facing police cases. And such cases will keep them on the run. They were on the run during the 2018 election and such a situation may happen again. The opposition will be harassed using such cases, and they will not be able to stay in or visit their localities, so it will be difficult for them to participate in the election in its true sense.

There is also the Digital Security Act (DSA), and the government is trying to enact some more black laws, which may become obstacles for a conducive election atmosphere. In our country, the government is not being formed based on people's will; as a result, there are no accountability measures in place. If you go to people seeking votes, you have to be accountable to them as you will need to go to them again to seek votes in five years.

How would you evaluate the EC's performance thus far?

They have announced a roadmap for the next election, but I think it is aimed nowhere. I would say it is a roadmap for a failed election. They may end up holding an election haphazardly. If they do hold the election in such a manner and fail to meet their constitutional obligations, someday they will be held responsible and may have to answer for their failure.

Welcome to Millennial Motherhood



Syeda Samara Mortada, a feminist activist, is a coordinator at Bonhishukha, a feminist organisation working to unlearn gender and create a platform for youth to share their gender-based experiences.

SYEDA SAMARA MORTADA

After eight years of being an active mother – and by active, I mean one who is hands-on and heavily engaged in the everyday life of my daughter – I have finally come to terms with acknowledging the identity of motherhood. Until someone pointed out that I was irrefutably a “millennial mother” – a title that comes with its own nuances, just like the stretch marks that paradoxically best represent this role.

Being a millennial mother means that I am open, cool, suave and, of course, tech-savvy. But being the mother of an eight-year-old, who was born after the Gen-Z generation – a generation not yet named – means that all my progressive thoughts that I took pride in are now obsolete,

extinct even.

So, this generation – let's call them “Generation Unlabelled” – does not partake in human conversation. After all, why waste breath talking to someone face-to-face when you can send them a message or email them? However, every member of Generation Unlabelled has a YouTube account, through which you get to know about all the recent tricks they have mastered – be it baking, singing or even washing their hands for two minutes straight. Let's not forget: Google actually opened up Gmail for those under 13 years of age for the first time ever as a result of the global pandemic and the Generation Unlabelled having to do school from home. So what's a mere

YouTube channel, if not a walk in the park? Except, oh wait, they don't like walking in the park; it is but too mainstream. This generation can put the keyboard warriors of our generation to shame!

Even though I feel like a dinosaur most days, I can't be too critical of “Gen-Unlab,” for I, too, have had to

etc. The feminist in me could not help myself but stop her from doing so, because after all, aren't those the exact stereotypes my comrades and I have been trying to break for women and girls for eternity? And here was my own flesh and blood wanting to join a cooking class! I thought about this later, and it certainly wasn't very

My daughter wanted to join a cooking club in school but the feminist in me could not help myself but stop her from doing so. After all, aren't those the exact stereotypes my comrades and I have been trying to break for women for eternity? And here was my own flesh and blood wanting to join a cooking class! I thought about this later, and it certainly wasn't very wise to limit my own daughter's choices, and with it her agency. So we settled on the dance club.

question my millennial instincts from time to time since becoming a mother. My daughter wanted to join a cooking club in school, among the many other options present, which included dance, art, chess, karate,

wise – as the woke mother that I present myself to be – to limit my own daughter's choices, and with it her agency. So we settled on the dance club.

A friend of mine once told me, “No

matter how progressive you think you are, your children will always do something to surprise you. It will be above and beyond what you imagined they are capable of doing. So, draw the bar a little lower, let her know that it is not okay, even though it may be okay to you. And so, when she crosses that bar, it won't actually be much of a surprise.” I thought it was good advice, and took it. But what I wasn't prepared for was the zillion life lessons I would end up getting from my daughter, when in fact I always thought it ought to be the other way around. After all, aren't I the parent?

A few days ago, my daughter and I were having a conversation where I ended with a speech saying something along the lines of, “This is what mothers do. Mothers are meant to discipline, and scold you when you are wrong.” To this, she answered, “Then why do you think daughters should continue to love their mothers?” I was, as they say, bowled out. Another time, I asked her if she's afraid that I would be old soon and be bed-ridden. What I actually meant, and did not ask,

was if she was afraid of being in the world without me, and wanted her to say that she was, and that she would miss me terribly if I were not by her side. She, on the other hand, instantly answered, “What is there to be afraid about? Everyone is going to get old one day; I am, too.” Did I mention that she is eight?

So, all my progressiveness and liberalism have been flung out of the uncanny window by this one; all the wise words I say to others around me on a daily basis, my daughter brushes off with a mere shrug and a gesture of her hands. However, one thing that is probably different about our generation of parents is that we want to challenge what parenting means and shake things up a little. One thing I keep mentioning to her, and hope she remembers, is that I am her safe space, that there is nothing, no slip up grave enough that she shouldn't be able to come and talk to me about, and I will help her through it. I will always trust her, and trust in her; that is what I believe every child needs to hear – Gen-Unlab and the ones after them.

/Opinion

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Checkout act
5 Frau's spouse
9 Mistake
11 Mideast peninsula
12 Mission man
13 Reversed
14 Had dinner
15 Purpose of some machines
17 Bank business
19 Neckline shape
20 Motionless
21 Wine choice
22 Grab
24 Snapshot
26 Looks upon
29 Sermon subject

30 Showing flexibility
32 Looking after
34 Zero
35 Isolated
36 Wed in haste
38 Assesses
39 Zellweger of “Chicago”
40 Realized
41 Crew need

DOWN

1 Rose part
2 Packing boxes
3 Fiery
4 Neither follower
5 Hart's mate
6 Salad green
7 Came down

8 Corduroy feature
10 Abuse verbally
11 Warbled
16 Pep up
18 Brake type
21 Marsh plant
23 Snappy retort
24 Baking need
25 Deep-seated
27 Ryder of “Beetlejuice”
28 Skilled shooter
29 Unadorned
30 Comic's stock
31 Chorus songs
33 Sketched
37 Summer sign

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SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

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BAIT GEMS
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DESOT RARE
TERM HENS
AESOP
CITY OF WOMEN
ACRE PIRATE
BEER DETECT

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT