

A dangerous role reversal

Cops involved in crimes and torture must be brought to justice

Looting, Torture, Extortion. You would expect these nefarious activities from hardened criminals, and not from those whose job it is to prevent them. But what happens when their roles are reversed? For Rajib Kar Raju – a jewellery shop worker who was allegedly looted, tortured, and extorted by three cops from Dhaka's Kotwali Police Station in 2019 – it meant seeing his chance of justice slip further away, because of the impunity enjoyed by members of the police force. This is quite disturbing.

Rajib Kar is but one of the many victims of custodial torture in Bangladesh. In interviews and official letters and complaints, he described how two police officers in plainclothes raided his house in the capital's Goanagar area on February 10, 2019, and took 28 tolas of gold jewellery and Tk 41,300 cash from his possession. Then, they took him to the police station where another cop joined them as they beat him mercilessly and left him unconscious. Then, he was tortured again and given electric shock. Later, they demanded Tk 5 lakh for his release, of which he was able to pay Tk 2 lakh. Till date, Rajib doesn't know why he was targeted, nor did he get back the looted gold or money.

The second part of his ordeal began after he sought to bring his tormentors to justice. He wrote to the National Human Rights Commission, which was unable to elicit a response from the home ministry and police headquarters. He approached them all, unsuccessfully. Finally, on March 2, he managed to file a case with a Dhaka court under the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act. Since then, Rajib says, he received phone calls from people identifying themselves as police officers threatening him to withdraw the case. Given these impediments and the extremely slow pace of investigation – a common feature in cases related to police misconduct – there is no guarantee that Rajib will get justice anytime soon.

All this is a sobering reality check for those who hoped things would change for the better after a historic verdict, two years ago, sentenced five policemen to various jail terms over the custodial death of Ishtiaque Hossain Jonny. Since then, there has been little substantive change in terms of accountability for the police force. We have had various reports of custodial torture and even death. Members of the police force, including the Rapid Action Battalion, were often flagged for misconduct and use of excessive force. Although the authorities claim to have taken action after every such instance, the truth is, justice has been neither visible nor promptly and proactively served in most cases. Also, the standard official response has been mostly reactive rather than preventive, which is really ill-suited to the needs of our time.

We urge the higher authorities to expedite Rajib Kar Raju's case and all such cases so that justice can be delivered swiftly. The victims also need protection against their powerful tormentors, as well as legal and monetary support. The government must deal with errant police officials with the highest priority.

Undeserved promotions must stop

Establish accountability and transparency in government offices

It is concerning to learn that government officials in the public administration cadre are getting blanket promotions despite there being no posts against these promotions. According to the calculations of the ministry of public administration, currently there are 5,971 officers working in the ministry. While there are 337 posts of additional secretary, in reality, as many as 433 people are working as additional secretaries, meaning that there are 96 additional secretaries for whom there are no posts. And 717 officials have been promoted to joint secretaries against 502 posts, which means there are 215 more joint secretaries than are designated. The same goes for the positions of deputy secretaries. Moreover, the process of giving new promotions in the ministry is ongoing. Reportedly, this trend of giving promotions without following due procedure has been going on for almost a decade now.

The question is, what purpose will this large pool of high-ranking officials – who have been promoted in these posts despite there being no vacant positions – serve in the ministry, as their job responsibilities do not change with their promotions? Reportedly, most of these newly promoted officials are performing their previous job responsibilities, and no additional responsibilities have been given to them. The question that naturally arises is, why then did the ministry give them such blanket promotions? The answer is simple: promoted officials can draw higher salaries and have more perks and benefits. Clearly, these promotions have been given solely to please the officials concerned.

Unfortunately, while a huge amount of public money is spent for government officials – reportedly, more than 25 percent of the total budget for FY 2022-23 has been allocated for the salaries and pensions of government employees – its return has been anything but satisfactory. People often complain of not getting their desired service from government offices (and officials). There are also allegations of corruption and irregularities against many government offices. Bribing as a means of getting services from these offices is also a common complaint that people make.

We think, in any modern state, the structure of administration and its posts should be determined as per demand. If there is a need to promote the officials in the public administration cadre, the government must first create the required positions. But by giving blanket promotions, the government has just set a bad precedent, and it is likely that it will create chaos and anarchy in the ministry concerned, the public sector in general and beyond.

We hope the public administration ministry will realise this and stop this culture of unnecessary promotions at the expense of taxpayers. The authorities should rather focus on making the administration more efficient and people-friendly so that people get their desired services without hassle. Most importantly, there should be accountability and transparency in all the works of the administration.

EVMs and a mind-reading election commissioner



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Did you know that mind-reading was an essential trait for the job of an election commissioner? I did not. But, now we know it since one of our election commissioners, Md Alamgir, has said that those who are opposing the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs) in the upcoming general election do have faith in the EVMs in their hearts. He has also claimed that 120 million voters in the country have faith in the EVMs. Who, other than a mind reader or an expert in public psychology, can be so certain that the opponents of EVMs, in fact, are not telling the truth, or at the least not revealing what they really think or believe?

Election Commissioner Alamgir has experience in election management since the introduction of EVMs, the most controversial voting tool in the country, as he worked at the Election Commission (EC) on deputation from the civil service. He first came into the media limelight in 2020, when he, as the secretary at the Election Commission, set a new precedent by telling journalists that returning officers are not accountable to any individual election commissioner and any information sought regarding the polls must be passed through the EC Secretariat. His comments were in response to the late Election Commissioner Mahbub Talukdar's statement on non-compliance of his instructions by the returning officers in two city corporation polls in Dhaka regarding the violation of the electoral code of conduct by candidates. In a way, he is the most experienced election manager among his fellow commissioners. There's little doubt that the introduction of the EVMs in the 2018 election, albeit on a limited scale, was a whimsical decision and lacked consensus among the contesting parties.

In addition to the usual arguments made by the chief election commissioner (CEC) and other members of the EC about the so-called benefits of EVMs, Md Alamgir said those who wrote against the use of EVMs had not voted using the EVMs, never seen it, and were unwilling to hear about it. He asked whether any of those voters who had used the EVMs had ever written any column in a newspaper. No wonder, the contagion effect of the government's search for



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PHOTO: COLLECTED

helpful columnists has reached the EC. Md Alamgir has also forgotten that when he was working as an EC secretary, voters did not have to go to the polling centres as ballot boxes were allegedly stuffed the night before with some help from the bureaucracy and law enforcement forces.

Election Commissioner Alamgir repeated the EC's favourite mantra: "Wherever voting took place using EVMs, there was no fighting, bloodshed, rigging and not even a single complaint." Perhaps they have not noticed the reported incident of EVM snatching in Patuakhali during the union parishad (UP) elections held in November 2021. According to media reports, eight EVMs were snatched away from the Kazirkanda Government Primary School polling centre in Panpatti Union under Galachipa upazila by the supporters of the losing candidates. If it can happen in the UP elections, how can one rule out the possibility of the recurrence of this incident in the most important electoral contest in the country – the parliamentary election?

Md Alamgir also seems to have forgotten that the losing mayoral candidate of Cumilla City Corporation, Monirul Haque Sakku, lodged a case

with experts, the EC has found that adding paper trail is not possible at this moment.

In addition, a few other things have proven that EVMs are not the answer for restoring the Election Commission's credibility and its ability to conduct a fair election. Among those are the lack of sufficient testing of the machines, because wherever they have been used, the polling there has been mired in controversy, either due to boycott by the presumed lead contending party, or low voter turnout, or intimidating environment and takeover of the voting booths by the ruling party men, or problems with matching fingerprints, or the polling officials' discretionary power to cast vote on someone's behalf.

Now it has emerged that the EC has undertaken two very ambitious projects for conducting polling by EVMs: one is the procurement of 200,000 new EVMs, which would cost at least Tk 6,000 crore, and the other is to get fresh fingerprints of all the voters. The total cost for procuring EVMs and their accessories, storage and security will be Tk 8.71 crore. Based on the budget allocation for the 2018 election (except the cost for the sudden addition of a few thousand

as national ID cards, has already caused huge problems and sufferings for the citizens due to silly mistakes, like misspelling of names, addresses, non-inclusion of postal codes, wrong inputs about dates of birth, etc. Those mistakes are largely the result of inefficiencies of the EC Secretariat and its field staff. When the EC is still struggling with the backlog of millions of faulty ID cards, why would anyone believe that it is capable of making a new fingerprint database of 120 million voters, the number noted by Md Alamgir?

In the absence of a national consensus, and being the preferred choice of the ruling party, any attempt for a forced introduction of the EVMs will only increase suspicion about the EC's intent among both the voters and the parties vying for power. The alleged alterations by the EC of the opinion of some political parties on EVM use to show a higher number in favour has already raised doubts about their intent. The EC should not waste any more time, energy and resources over the EVM fantasy. Instead, the commission would be wiser to concentrate on building consensus for a fair and participatory election, and prepare accordingly.

Stealing the applause and appreciation



CHINTITO SINCE 1995

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NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

As part of my health upkeep, on a daily basis, I take several oral medicines, a spoonful of black cumin, shreds of ginger, garlic and turmeric, large portions of fish and vegetables, and a date or two every other day. I have substantially cut down on rice, and eat no sweets, dairy or bakery items, nor fizzy drinks. Apart from dietary management, I walk briskly for half an hour. After months of regimentation, my sugar level dropped down below seven. Now, in my sudden gain, which I have yearned for years, I am truly at a loss as to which of my practices should I credit for such a joy.

The morning after, as I opened the front door of our house, I was rather amused to see a hitherto unseen and unthinkable drama. The *shobjiwala*, the baker, my doctor, the beverage shopkeeper, the fishmonger, the spice seller, and a host of unknown people, were all gleeful and looking downright silly wearing garlands of marigold. Seeing the media cameras, they were shoving each other and shouting "I did it," dwarfing me and drowning my voice, and ruining my biggest day.

Our women footballers suffer from a similar quandary, seeing that there are dozens of claimants to the credit after they became the champions of South Asia football on September 19.

Overcoming Maldives by 3-0, Pakistan 6-0, India 3-0, Bhutan 8-0, and finally Nepal by 3-1 over a span of 12 days is being shamelessly ballyhooed as contribution of several Jodu, Modhu and Kodu.

Acknowledgement-seekers emerged in full force at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. There was a *hirik* of several non-associated males garlanding each other with marigold. There was a government directive at the time due to Covid resurfacing, but being falsely tagged as THE man responsible for the women's championship was a unique opportunity. The *tamasha* would not look bad, if that was possible, had the heroes been respected, highlighted and granted their due recognition.

Despite being shoved back to make room for the amla and *kamla*, the women footballers were magnanimous in their victory and held their head high in dignified modesty. In an implausible defence of the gate-crashing men, they did sign some files at the secretariat, and the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) Bhaban. In exposing their hand of disbelief and low expectation, the BFF Bhaban was not illuminated, although the ladies arrived two days after their famous

victory. Did someone say austerity?

The impressive open-air festive bus was a surprise, commendably acquired in a day. However, the exclusivity of that triumphal journey through streets lined by grateful fans was also violated by unwanted and unqualified intruders, who did nothing for our football, but were on the top waving along with the champions.

The sick mental condition stems from a mindset developed under centuries of colonialism, when a petty favour from the masters, acquired by a few among the subjugated, by guile and betrayal, was highlighted among the minions. People are more akin to rejecting such opportunists now.

The BFF president of 14 years contributed most by not being at Kathmandu's Dasharath Rangasala Stadium during the final match of SAFF Women's Championship 2022 because, according to him, the players would have been under additional pressure. An astounding concept, no doubt! The "clandestine cheerleader" did not crowd the arrival lounge at the airport either. Instead, he came to light at the infamous press conference later in Motijheel, where, after a while, the players, the coach and the team staff were relegated to the back. Even then, in the nation's heart, the humble and

reserved women champs were at the forefront.

The girls achieved the SAFF laurel after years of silent labour, quietly shedding tears and making sacrifices with their families, notably without any significant media attention or public interest. They are now painting a dream on a larger canvas, their determination sky-high. Let us not disserve their type of homespun football by drastically changing the system, especially by selfish schemers, who have sniffed glory.

What could be the psyche behind this ugly practice of stealing the limelight despite having no intellectual, technical, moral or effective input in any of the 23 goals that our girls scored in Kathmandu? The best goalkeeper of the tournament has to sadly take the blame for the only goal consumed, because none of the garlanded guardians will. Undeserved bouquets, yes. Brickbats? Are you crazy?

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Ever since the mayhem of stealing the applause and acclamation, I have been thinking rather deeply. Do I have a stake in the achievement of our women footballers? Of course, I do. I watched the final match on TV because I did not want them to be under undue pressure from the presence of an irrelevant uncle from back home. Where's my marigold, eh?