

This is how it is done

EC shows rare courage in halting Gaibandha by-poll, but it cannot ensure fair elections alone

That a day would come when the Election Commission would do anything beyond perfunctory efforts to stop electoral irregularities was unthinkable even a few days ago. But the unthinkable has happened. The suspension of the Gaibandha-5 by-poll, after voting was stopped in 50 out of 145 centres amid widespread irregularities and a mass boycott by all but the Awami League candidate, is an extraordinary move, an exercise of the highest power granted to the EC. We welcome its courage – a rarity for bureaucrats turned commissioners – which is perhaps the only silver lining to an otherwise botched operation. But we must add: even that may not be enough to ensure fair elections.

The suspension decision has, justifiably, stunned both political parties and election observers, who noted its unprecedented nature in the recent history of parliamentary elections. But too much focus on the merits of the decision risks taking away from the fact that serious irregularities did occur, in the presence of election and law enforcement officials no less. The EC justified its move by citing serious violations including illegal presence in secret polling booths, voters being forced to vote for a certain candidate, criminals cutting the cables of CCTV cameras, etc. The situation was “out of control”, it said. Some candidates also alleged that their agents were forced out of the centres. An independent candidate even said that Awami League men didn't allow him to cast his own vote.

So, while it's true that the EC took a drastic decision in its first brush with parliamentary elections, it is also true that it did so in the face of tremendous odds. If this is a sign of things to come, we have every reason to worry about the upcoming national election. Right now, the challenge for the EC is to get the Gaibandha-5 by-poll back on track. But it also has to investigate all irregularities and the potential complicity of election officials, and punish those responsible. Otherwise, all this will amount to nothing but an exercise to win over disgruntled opposition parties.

Until Wednesday, the EC largely appeared to be appeasing the ruling party in election-related decisions. It allowed the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs) in the upcoming national election, despite protests from most political parties. It refused to punish high-profile violators of electoral codes. It failed to send a strong message to field-level administrators – deputy commissioners (DCs) and superintendents of police (SPs) – after their grievous misconduct in a recent conference. As well as setting examples of neutrality and transparency in all its decisions and preventing any collusion among election officials and the ruling party, the EC also has to figure out a way to secure unconditional support from the administration. This is a tall order indeed, and we remain unconvinced that the EC can navigate all these challenges and ensure fair elections on its own. This is why the support of all stakeholders, especially the ruling party, is vital. The public has grown tired of watching violent and non-participatory elections year after year. The authorities must find a way to avoid that in the future.

Govt must solve ongoing power crisis

Independent power plants must remain operational

The power sector seems to be in a total mess at the moment. Unfortunately, when people are struggling with long hours of load shedding every day, the government and power-producing companies seem to be doing little to bring an end to the problem. The crisis has become acute this month as many of the independent power plants (IPPs) that run on heavy fuel oil have stopped producing electricity, because of a standoff with the government over non-payment of bills. Reportedly, the government owes a staggering Tk 16,000 crore to the IPPs, and the latter are unwilling to import fuel to generate electricity until their bills are cleared.

The bills include the price of fuel, power purchased by the government, and capacity charge, which the government is legally obligated to pay even if it does not buy power from a plant. Reportedly, on October 12, as many as 48 power plants were sitting completely idle citing fuel shortages and engine problems – a quarter of them run on heavy fuel oil. While, according to the president of Bangladesh Independent Power Producers' Association, the unpaid bills have mostly hampered small- and medium-sized power plants – which exhausted their banking lines and can no longer open lines of credit – even big companies that can buy fuel from Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation are reportedly also sitting idle citing high import costs. Moreover, some of the companies are not operating despite having the fuel to go into production. Thus, it seems, most of the IPPs are using the power crisis to create a pressure on the government. This is totally unacceptable.

From the present power crisis, it is clear that our policies regarding power generation have been flawed on many grounds. It has been identified in various news reports published over the past few months that the deals the government had signed with the power plants and companies went against our national interests. These companies have not only been taking an insane amount of money from the exchequer as capacity charges, they are also selling electricity at much higher prices. Many of the short-term rental power plants have been running for a decade now with high profit margins. As they went through multiple renewals over the years, they kept the provisions for capacity payments intact, which means huge amounts of public money are still being wasted on them.

In order to recover from the present power crisis, the government must come to an understanding with the IPPs so that they do not stop their production. While the government must pay the companies their dues as soon as possible, it must also take action against the companies that are unnecessarily worsening the crisis. Finally, we need a complete overhaul of our energy policies, including a critical rethink of the provision for capacity charges, to avoid any further crisis.

Is Gaibandha-5 by-poll a prelude to the main show?



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With the next parliamentary election of Bangladesh a year away, the widespread irregularities at the by-election to the Gaibandha-5 constituency on Wednesday – which led to four candidates out of five boycotting the by-poll – has raised some questions, including if this EC would be able to hold a free, fair, and inclusive general election after all.

The scenario was all too familiar. Supporters of the ruling party candidate were seen taking over the polling centres, while CCTV cameras were removed from a number of polling stations and votes were rigged. The chaos prompted the EC to suspend voting, which was a commendable move considering the election experiences of the last two commissions.

The EC Secretariat monitored the voting process from Dhaka, thanks to the recently introduced CCTV cameras installed in all the polling centres. Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibur Awal said the commission had stopped voting as the situation had gone out of control. He, however, refrained from specifying who was responsible for the irregularities.

Here lies the big question.

The role of law enforcement agencies is a crucial factor here. If they were active enough, outsiders could not have entered the polling stations. Why did the law enforcement law enforcement agencies fail so miserably to play their due role during the election? A voting booth is a sacred place for a voter to exercise their electoral franchise as it ensures confidentiality and privacy. But that was breached in the by-poll. The CEC said the commission had seen people entering the voting booths. The EC has to rely mainly on law enforcement agencies to stop all sorts of irregularities during an election. But it seems the EC was not able to utilise the law enforcement agencies in Gaibandha, and they had to exercise the maximum authority at their disposal. The CEC's statement, once again, demonstrated that electronic voting machines (EVMs) were vulnerable to manipulation if the local administration and law enforcement agencies failed or refused to carry out

their responsibilities.

Although the commission has been repeatedly stressing the use of EVMs to hold a free and fair election, this Gaibandha-5 by-poll have exposed that these innocuous machines alone cannot be a means to end election irregularities, unless other issues – such as ensuring that citizens can vote without fear, for instance – are not addressed.

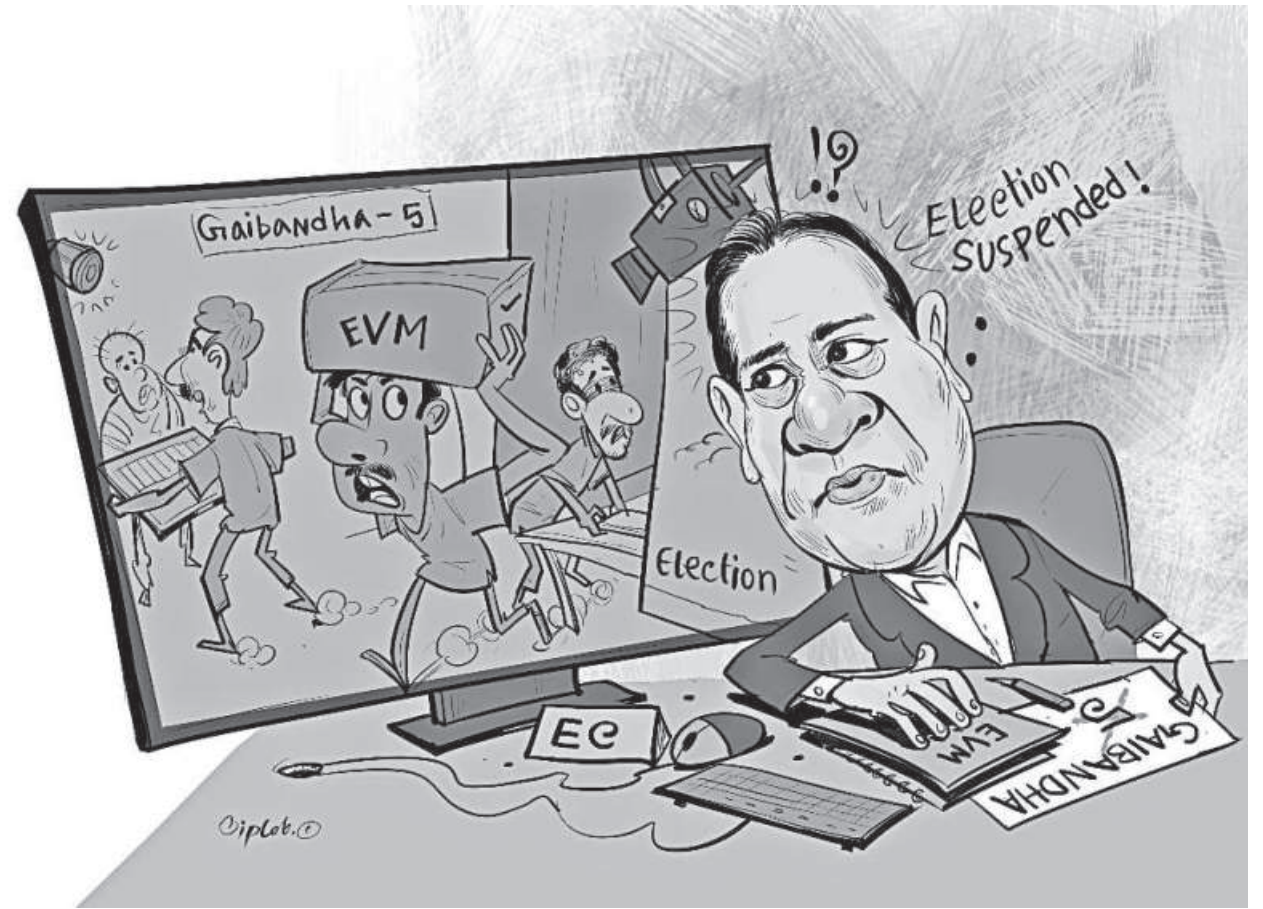
Political parties, observers, and experts have long been saying that the Election Commission should work more on improving the environment so as to restore public trust in the country's electoral system. What happened in Gaibandha-5 on Wednesday was an eye-opener for the commission to work on these issues to ensure a free, fair, and inclusive election.

The commission can say that they

took the right step by stopping the voting. But they need to find out why such a situation arose in the first place. Was it preventable?

There is no doubt that this by-election will give an upper hand to the opposition parties to reinforce their stance that a free and fair election would not be possible under this EC as

the commission had formed a probe committee to look into the irregularities and submit a report within seven days. Yes, an investigation is needed. But people would be more interested to see the investigation results identifying the culprits and ensuring their punishment. Otherwise, the EC's action, which they took from



well as the incumbent government.

So, to dispel the commotion among the opposition parties, the commission needs to investigate in earnest to find out why the situation went out of control in Gaibandha-5, and who was behind it. They also need to ponder the course of action leading up to the 12th parliamentary election that is scheduled to be held in late 2023 or early 2024.

The CEC reaffirmed that all the EVMs used in the Gaibandha-5 by-poll had been working properly.

“There was no mechanical problem during the election and all the EVMs worked properly. The problem was caused by the people. To find out who were responsible for the malpractice, a thorough investigation is needed,” the CEC told reporters on Wednesday.

The CEC said on Thursday that

their constitutional obligations, will not make much difference.

In Gaibandha, the EC may have done the right thing, at least in appearance, but is stopping the polling on an election day to prevent irregularities all they should do? What people expect is that the commission would make sure all measures are in place long before the voting day so that no one would get any scope to engage in irregular activities.

One wonders how the EC would tackle possible irregularities during the general election, when voting would take place in 300 constituencies on a single day. Will it be possible for the EC to install enough CCTV cameras in all 300 constituencies? Will it be realistic for the EC to monitor all the polling stations through CCTV cameras? Will it stop voting in all 300 seats in case of widespread irregularities?

Persons with disabilities are integral to innovative solutions



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Ten years ago, the Asia-Pacific region came together and designed the world's first set of disability-specific development goals: the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities. We are going to meet again to assess how the governments have delivered on their commitments, to secure those gains and develop the innovative solutions needed to achieve fully inclusive societies.

Ministers, government officials, persons with disabilities, civil society and private sector allies from Asia and the Pacific will gather on October 19-21 in Jakarta to mark the birth of a new era for 700 million persons with disabilities, and proclaim a fourth Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities.

Our region is unique, having already declared three decades to protect and uphold the rights of persons with disabilities. Forty-four Asian and Pacific governments have ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and we celebrate achievements in the development of disability laws, policies, strategies, and programmes.

Today, we have more

parliamentarians and policymakers with disabilities. Their everyday business is national decision-making. They also monitor policy implementation. We find them active across the Asia-Pacific region: Australia, Bangladesh, China, Japan, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Türkiye. They have promoted inclusive public procurement to support disability-inclusive businesses and accessible facilities, advanced sign language interpretation in media programmes and parliamentary sessions, focused policy attention on overlooked groups, and directed numerous policy initiatives towards inclusion.

Less visible but no less important are local-level elected politicians with disabilities in India, Japan and the Republic of Korea. Indonesia witnessed 42 candidates with disabilities standing in the last election. Grassroots disability organisations have emerged as rapid responders to emerging issues such as Covid-19 and other crises. Organisations of and for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh have distinguished themselves in disability-

inclusive Covid-19 responses, and created programmes to support persons with psychosocial disabilities and autism.

The past decade saw the emergence of private sector leadership in disability-inclusive business. Wipro, headquartered in India, pioneers disability inclusion in its multinational growth strategy. This is a pillar of Wipro's diversity and inclusion initiatives. Employees with disabilities are at the core of designing and delivering Wipro digital services.

Yet, there is always more unfinished business to address. Even though we applaud the increasing participation of persons with disabilities in policymaking, there are still only eight persons with disabilities for every 1,000 parliamentarians in the region. On the right to work, three in four persons with disabilities are not employed, while seven in 10 persons with disabilities do not enjoy any form of social protection.

This sobering picture points to the need for disability-specific and disability-inclusive policies and their sustained implementation in partnership with women and men with disabilities.

One of the first steps to inclusion is recognising the rights of persons with disabilities. This model focuses on the person and their dignity, aspirations, individuality and value as a human being. As such, government offices, banks and public transportation and spaces must be made accessible for persons with diverse disabilities. To this end, governments in the region have conducted accessibility audits of government buildings and public

transportation stations. Partnerships with the private sector have led to reasonable accommodations at work, promoting employment in a variety of sectors.

Despite the thrust of the Incheon Strategy on data collection and analysis, persons with disabilities still are often left out of official data, because the questions that allow for disaggregation are excluded from surveys, and accommodations are not made to ensure their participation. This reflects a continued lack of policy priority and budgetary allocations. To create evidence-based policies, we need reliable and comparable data disaggregated by disability status, sex and geographic location.

There is hope in the technology leap to 5G in the Asia-Pacific region. The implications for the empowerment of individuals are limitless: from digital access, e-healthcare and assistive devices at affordable prices to remote learning and working, and exercising the right to vote. This is a critical moment to ensure disability-inclusive digitalisation.

We live in a world of volatile change. A disability-inclusive approach to shape this world would benefit everyone, particularly in a rapidly ageing Asia-Pacific region where everyone's contributions will matter. As we stand on the precipice of a fourth Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, it remains our duty to insist on a paradigm shift to celebrate diversity and disability inclusion. When we dismantle barriers and persons with disabilities surge ahead, everyone benefits.