

Don't let scammers exploit refugees

Govt must be vigilant about fake NIDs and tampered voter lists

It is clear from recent news reports that the condition of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is becoming increasingly vulnerable. On Wednesday, a Rohingya man was picked up from his house in Balukhali refugee camp and shot dead. The day before, another was killed at the Kutupalong camp. Last week, a young Rohingya man was killed by miscreants, not long after his father was also killed in the Tajnimar Khola 19 camp.

In the meantime, the Myanmar military junta has started the process of transferring the ownership of land that originally belonged to Rohingya refugees, often for generations, before they were forced to flee in 2017 – thus adding a new layer of complications to any potential repatriation process.

In the midst of all this, it is reprehensible that criminal elements have been preying on this vulnerable group of refugees and dangling the carrot of Bangladeshi citizenship in front of them in exchange for exorbitant amounts of money. According to a report in this daily, a syndicate operating from Chattogram city has been charging Tk 1.30 lakh per head to issue fake national identity (NID) cards for Rohingya refugees.

This is the third time that such a scam has been discovered in the area. Out of the 10 people who were arrested by Chattogram Metropolitan Police in this connection, we are horrified to find that five are local Election Commission (EC) employees. Police investigations have revealed that these are data entry operators engaged in creating updated voter lists, and they have been abusing their positions to make a quick buck at the expense of national security.

The fact that some employees of the institution that is charged with organising free and fair elections in the country are engaging in such exploitative practices is indeed alarming. If NIDs can be issued so easily from a random high school in Chattogram, does that mean voter lists can be manipulated with equal ease? If so, where else are they being tampered with? And what is the EC doing to ensure that their employees are not engaging in this kind of corruption?

It is also concerning that police found evidence of the use of fake birth certificates for obtaining NIDs, and that these certificates were produced in Dhaka for Tk 1,500 each. How far does the rot, and this criminal network, extend? Can any certificate required by citizens be duplicated? While we appreciate that police are conducting investigations, it is worrying that two of the recently arrested criminals already had cases against them for a similar scam in Cox's Bazar, but were still able to continue their activities in Chattogram. Police action, clearly, hasn't had the restraining effect expected.

We urge the authorities, especially the EC, to treat this NID scam with the utmost seriousness. While it may seem to be a relatively small operation, its implications are huge, and can raise many questions about citizenship rights and democratic exercises in this country.

Painful aftermath of Cyclone Sitrang

Take steps to minimise the risk of farmers, fishers

After every natural calamity, the discussion in Bangladesh tends to veer toward the loss suffered in terms of life. This is perhaps natural, but death toll is an insufficient indicator of the extent of damage suffered by affected communities. After Cyclone Sitrang, which killed at least 35 people since lashing Bangladesh midweek, the focus too has been largely on deaths, or the relative lack thereof, if compared to the last few cyclones. But there are bigger concerns for the battered people who, again, must go through a painful process of relief, rehabilitation and rebuilding to get back on their feet.

The cyclone has left a trail of destruction that may take months, even years, to recover from. Reports indicate that vast stretches of cropland were devastated. In Khulna, for example, crops, vegetables and fruits grown on around 18,483 hectares of land have been reportedly damaged due to heavy rains and strong winds. Meanwhile, fish farms on around 23 hectares of land were also damaged. The same thing happened in Tangail. In Bhola, fishing communities were hit particularly hard. In Barguna, Pirojpur, Shariatpur, Noakhali and other districts, people were similarly affected. Individual accounts from many villages paint a bleak picture as people try to grapple with the post-cyclone reality. Apart from the physical damage to homes and sources of livelihood, there are also concerns about inadequate relief and rehabilitation efforts amidst continued outage in many places, where power lines are yet to be restored.

The immediate priority, of course, is to bring normalcy to the affected communities by reaching out to those in need of help. But we must keep in mind that, in the coming days, the frequency of such extreme weather events will only grow, thanks to climate change. Their fallout on food production is something we should consider seriously, given the present reality of shrinking access to food. We have seen how floods in Sylhet in mid-2022 led to kitchen market disruptions, including doubling of prices of vegetables. Food prices have since been on an upward spiral. Food inflation reached 9.08 percent in September, after hitting 9.94 percent in August, the highest in ten years. If food production continues to be hampered like this – amid our diminishing ability to import, because of dollar shortage – it only means further trouble down the road.

This should factor into the government's disaster management policy. Measures should be devised to minimise the effect of natural calamities on our food safety. There should also be additional protection for the poor farmers, fishers and others producing food, who are on the front line of any natural calamity. In this regard, one solution can be introducing agriculture insurance to mitigate the risk of farmers in the event of floods, cyclones, droughts, unseasonal and excessive rains, etc. We must shield our food producers if we are to survive in a changing natural world.

UK's Conservative Party and Our Politics

Some lessons in parliamentary democracy



THE THIRD VIEW

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MAHFUZ ANAM

MANY in Bangladesh laughed when Boris Johnson, who came to power after a massive election victory, was forced to resign because he broke Covid-19 restrictions and held a party – not in public, but in the privacy of his office. How can a prime minister, coming to power with the people's mandate, be forced to resign for such a trivial (to us) matter?

When Liz Truss took over as prime minister on September 6, and resigned 44 days later on October 20, we really thought that the UK had lost her way. Our former colonial master was now incapable of forming a stable government and did not know whom to choose as their prime minister.

We couldn't hold back our laughter.

And then Rishi Sunak came into the scene – at 42, being the youngest UK prime minister in 200 years – and we concluded that the original inhabitants of that famous island that ruled the empire, where the sun would never set, had become so depleted of talent and were in such a miserable state of political bankruptcy, that they were unable to find "one of their own" to rule themselves and had to seek one of Indian and Kenyan origin to do the job.

We held the UK up to ridicule.

In my view, our laughter on all these occasions was that of fools. We laughed because we have forgotten the meaning of elections. As voters, we have forsaken the duties and obligations of elected representatives and are no longer demanding of their moral and ethical accountability. We have abandoned our rights as voters and taxpayers.

We laughed at Boris Johnson's resignation because we have long since moved away from any notion of moral and ethical accountability of public representatives at all levels, including and especially at the highest levels. What little of legal accountability still remains is confined to a mechanical interpretation of the law, detached from its moral values and ethical underpinnings. (Recall the election of January 5, 2014. The Election Commission accepted 153 MPs as "elected," without voting, in a House of 300 – enough to form the next government. It did so on a narrow



COLLAGE: ANWAR SOHEL

technical interpretation of the law, devoid of the far bigger requirement of ensuring public participation. In these 153 constituencies, not a single vote was cast. If election means – and it cannot mean anything else – voters directly electing their representatives by casting ballots for their candidates of choice, then the above cannot be termed an election. Where were the people [voters] in these 153 constituencies? Yet, the Election Commission saw no moral and ethical issues in this instance).

Simply put, there is no accountability of our elected representatives and also of the process through which they emerge. Our public representatives come before the voters every five years, and what they do till the next time around is beyond public review. That is why we found Boris Johnson's resignation so strange, and a matter to trivialise. Johnson concluded, and so did his party, that he had failed the "ethical" accountability test. Will any of our leaders from any party subject themselves to such a test?

Let's come to Liz Truss' resignation. Here is another instance

of accountability. She gave a "mini" budget and had proposed huge tax cuts, and was unable to show how the deficit caused by these tax cuts would be met. The market reacted sharply and the Conservative leaders and MPs, seeing the imminent prospect of losing public support and risking the image of instability and confusion at the top, forced the new prime minister

This brings me to something that we have forgotten in South Asia – the role of the political party vis-à-vis that of the leader, the issue of the institution vs the individual. Most countries in the region follow the parliamentary system where the role of the party has become totally subsumed into that of the leader. They control the party with an iron hand where, leave alone

to resign.

This is accountability to the party.

The recent leadership changes in the Conservative Party that led to three prime ministers being appointed in four months may appear very chaotic, but even in this unprecedented situation, everything functioned within – not the law of the land – the Conservative Party system. Johnson did not smell any "conspiracy" to oust him, Sunak did not take to the streets with his supporters when Liz Truss was made the prime minister, though he led in the party polls all through, and finally Liz Truss bowed to the party when she lost its confidence without claiming an "external" hand in all this.

What we need to learn here is that the system worked. In the parliamentary system, it is the party that people elect by electing its MPs. Who the MPs then elect to lead assumes the office of the prime minister, to be given up as soon as the party decides otherwise. So, though Boris Johnson's charisma and ability to communicate and sway the voters are credited for the Conservative win in 2019, it was the party that got the mandate, not him.

challenges to leadership, a simple questioning policy is considered sacrilege. Such role of the party would be considered treason against the leaders, and the sitting prime minister would perhaps have the rebel MPs sent to oblivion.

What needs to be praised in Sunak's coming to power is the mindset of the Conservative Party – by its very name it is conservative – to select a person of Indian-Kenyan origin and someone who is a practising Hindu (As chancellor of exchequer, he took oath on the Gita, though the official religion of the UK is Christianity). This is at a time when the US is turning "White supremacist" and Europe anti-immigrant, whose latest example is Giorgia Meloni, the far-right Italian prime minister with fascist party connection.

But the risk of a "Brown shaheb" being worse than the shaheb himself cannot be ruled out, especially in terms of the policies towards diversity and inclusivity, whose beneficiaries he and his family definitely are. The early signs are concerning, especially some of his appointments.

An innovative way to achieve quality education in Bangladesh

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JASIMUZ ZAMAN

There is widespread concern among parents and society in general about the state of education in the high schools of Bangladesh. Education officials and policymakers are baffled by the absence of any visible effect on student attainment despite many government initiatives, such as providing training to thousands of teachers, providing teaching resources such as computers, science equipment and multimedia, and even raising teachers' salaries and benefits.

The disappointment and frustration of well-meaning individuals and NGOs are no less intense. Though NGO programmes, conducted in a project mode with close monitoring and evaluation, have had significant impacts on quality education, the outcomes at the end of the projects are often dismal as the schools fall back into their routine modes of operation.

Despite the disappointing scenario, the work I have carried out in 50 schools in different parts of the country over the last 12 years demonstrate that significant advancement in quality education is possible even within the existing constraints. Students in these schools made remarkable improvements in learning and academic results, English

language skills, Maths Olympiads, ICT, sports, debate, and cultural programmes. Using student-centred methods of classroom teaching and student participation in a range of activities allowed them to develop leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills, as well as enabling character-building.

These schools were able to achieve success because our project approach was based on trusting the teachers and their inherent desire for students to succeed. We also recognised the positive features in the rural environment, such as open environment and cohesiveness of community. We provided training, showed simple pathways, monitored and measured progress, and advised on logistics.

However, the positive results achieved by the teachers and students started dissipating as we gradually scaled down our direct involvement. While the community was enthusiastic about the results achieved, it lacked a sense of ownership over these results, since it had not participated by providing any material help for the programme.

To build and improve on our experience with the 50 schools, I propose a new approach: we would first create engagement and commitment between the community and the school for the mutual goal of quality education. We would show how quality education for the children benefits every member of the school and community. We would advocate the *shikkhar shamajik dayitto*

(social responsibility for education – SSD) approach to help establish a consensus that quality education is a basic right for children, and that society has the responsibility to help schools provide such education.

In the SSD approach, the community takes up the role of providing the resources needed for quality education, and quality is accomplished through the combined efforts of the school and community. If success is achieved, cooperative relationship can continue, and sustainability becomes a natural part of the outcome.

At the school level, the foundational work of SSD is done using the techniques of social mobilisation through participatory discussions. An action plan is drawn up in the form of *shamajik ongikar* (a social contract) specifying the roles and responsibilities of the school and the community.

Years of field-testing allowed us to make the quality education programme simple, workable, affordable, and effective. Basically, there are two training activities that open up the avenue to quality education: i) a simple pedagogy for teachers for active learning in the classroom by combining the group method with the classical chalk and duster method; and ii) hands-on training for leadership groups among students in different academic (English, maths, computers, etc) and co-curricular (debate, sports, cultural activities, etc) activities.

We believe that the schools adopting the programme with

shamajik ongikar can become self-reliant in a short span of time.

The programme may be launched in stages, acquiring agreement between the community and the school on the goals at each stage. To build a solid foundation of learning that will enable students to move forward with competence and confidence, the SSD effort may first be directed to students in classes VI, VII, and VIII in rural high schools. Classes IX and X can be included if the school and community wish.

There are over 25,000 high schools in the country's public education system, a large majority of which are rural. Achieving quality education in all schools in the country through a massive injection of resources and funds under a broad policy framework of the government would take a long time, and be subject to inconsistencies in delivery and reception. An innovative scheme is needed now to move towards quality education within the current constraints. In association with a few NGOs, this author is working with a number of schools using the SSD concept and has developed a framework for its effective implementation.

With successful piloting of the SSD concept, a campaign from the upazila level may be extended to district, divisional and national levels. With every community taking care of its own schools, the task becomes more focused and achievable. The country can take a leap in quality education and be ready to move forward from there.