

The Daily Star

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Irregularities abound in Gaibandha-5 by-polls

We would like to commend the EC for diligently doing its job

The Election Commission (EC) deserves a strong pat on the back for investigating and making public the findings of its probe into the Gaibandha-5 by-polls. For the first time in many years, the EC has taken a firm position on election irregularities, which is heartening to see. Election commissions in the recent past had utterly failed to perform their duty to the nation, and as a result, they had all but destroyed the institution's credibility. The general public clearly wants a reversal of that, and this is a good start in that direction.

The EC has recommended punishment for 134 officials involved in the Gaibandha-5 by-polls after its probe found their involvement in irregularities and negligence in performing duties. Although the number is high, they are mostly low-level officials, except for the returning officer. We are happy that the people who conducted a "well-orchestrated" effort to deny voters of their voting rights have been exposed, because it's high time for such efforts to be brought to light, and those participating in them being held accountable. However, it's strange to see that individuals who are in the higher echelons of government and law enforcement agencies – who failed to identify the plot to manipulate elections – are missing from the list of those the EC has identified so far.

As the Election Commission itself noted, the number and types of irregularities are concerning. Voters in many cases were, in fact, forced by polling agents to cast votes for a specific symbol. The commission in its review said similar irregularities took place in almost all the polling centres and that they were done in a well-planned manner. This implies that the settings were far from right to allow a free and fair election to be held. Incidentally, the EC also lamented that it had become clear "from this incident that irregularities in elections have become a usual matter."

Although people have made that allegation for a while now, the unfortunate lack of courage displayed by previous commissions and the absence of concrete measures have made holding free and fair elections and upholding people's voting franchise all the more difficult. In regard to ensuring them, the EC still has a long way to go. However, in light of its recent actions, we would like to extend our full support.

In the coming days, the EC must come up with a realistic strategy as to how it will monitor, tackle and address such irregularities if they happen in the majority of polling stations in the country. For example, one of the key takeaways from this by-poll is that every polling centre should be equipped with enough CCTVs. However, will there be enough manpower to ensure they are being monitored in real time? Will the EC have the courage in the end to take bold steps during the national elections, as they did during the Gaibandha by-polls? The EC has gotten off to a good start, but the challenge now is to stay the course.

Towards a disability-inclusive society

Why are persons with disabilities still denied their rights?

As we observe the International Day of Persons with Disabilities today (December 3), people with disabilities across the country continue to still struggle, often in silence, for their basic rights. According to the recent population census conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), some 4.74 million people in the country – 2.4 percent of our total population – have some form of disability. They face serious discrimination in all spheres of their lives and are denied access to healthcare, education and employment, despite the fact that we have laws and regulations to protect their rights.

We know that accessibility remains a big issue for persons with disabilities. Our schools, colleges and universities are still far from being inclusive and accessible. A majority of buildings don't have ramps and toilet facilities for the disabled; the same goes for the public transport system. Although there are some seats reserved for people with physical disabilities in public buses, getting into these buses is extremely difficult for them.

When it comes to education, it is still not easy for a child with a physical or mental disability to get enrolled in a mainstream school. Even if a child can get admitted, he or she finds it difficult to cope with the environment due to a lack of assistance from all concerned. In the case of university education, students with disabilities often don't get to choose the subject they would like to study because of a lack of study material as well as logistical support. It is most unfortunate that our major public universities have still not been able to create a conducive environment for students with disabilities. As a result, the number of such students pursuing tertiary-level education is still very low.

Understandably, people with disabilities find it tough to get into the job market since there are very few employment opportunities for them. Moreover, most offices are unfortunately still not ready to employ persons with physical disabilities as their staff. The struggle of the disabled does not end here, though. For them, getting access to healthcare is also difficult, as there are no special arrangements in our hospitals to cater to their specific needs. In order to ensure that people with disabilities don't lag behind in society and get the benefits of development equally, the relevant laws and regulations must be enforced properly. Our negative mindset towards disability must also change. People with disabilities are not a burden; it is only our mindset that makes them so.

Our policymakers must ensure their inclusion in education and the job market, by recognising and developing their unique skills and abilities, through different types of vocational and other specialised training. In addition, the government's budgetary allocation for persons with disabilities must increase, while its social safety net programmes must be made disability-inclusive. The state must ensure that the persons with disabilities can live their lives with dignity.

Why do crossfires seem so popular?

Extrajudicial killings have their appeal for a people that feel that their justice system will fail them



THE OUTSPOKEN ONE

Anupam Debashis Roy is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

ANUPAM DEBASHIS ROY

Shaheen Miah, also known as City Shaheen, was killed by the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) recently in a "gunfight." It is believed that he might have been involved in the sensational murder of Buet student Fardin Noor Parash. Shaheen's brother believes that there was no gunfight involved at all, and Shaheen was simply murdered in cold blood by the law enforcement agency. It is hard to verify his claim, even after he supplied this daily with a video. In any case, the commonly held belief is that these supposed "gunfights," generally speaking, never take place. Instead, they are just euphemisms for events where law enforcement agencies extrajudicially kill people that they think are criminals.

I am not absolving the people who are at the receiving end of these crossfires. Many a time, they are heinous criminals, often charged with drug dealing and even murder. City Shaheen was one such criminal himself. He had 23 cases against him and was wanted for murder. Nevertheless, he should have been brought to the court instead – that is the way of a civilised polity. We must remember as a nation that being an alleged criminal is not the same as being one, and getting killed for allegedly being a criminal cannot be the norm in any way. (In fact, even a convicted criminal cannot be subjected to extrajudicial killing.)

However, this evasion of justice has not exactly appalled the public. Judging by the comments on a Facebook post by this daily that shared a perspective from City Shaheen's wife that he should have been given a chance to defend himself in court, crossfires still remain fairly popular. People on Facebook were exhilarated that such a "scum" like Shaheen was brutally killed. They had a similar reaction when alleged drug peddlers



VISUAL: STAR

were killed during the government's anti-narcotics drive. Not just the regular people, but even the senior lawmakers of the country have lauded the practice of crossfires by saying in parliament that rapists should be executed using this method.

But why do people love crossfires? Because they have given up on the system, being let down by it so many times that they can no longer trust it to deliver due justice. In City Shaheen's Chonpara area, many drug peddlers have been arrested before, but they have gotten out on bail and continued with their criminal activities. In many cases, these criminals are quite powerful, too, often found having connections with the ruling party and other powerful quarters, which makes it easy for them to evade justice.

Another reason people love crossfires is that it gives them a sort

of immediate recourse. The justice system in this country can be tedious. A bullet to the head is faster than that.

There is an element of bloodlust in it as well. When people see some sort of heinous murder, they crave blood for blood. But what they forget is that the tables may turn and they may someday have to be on the receiving

end of this "swift justice" without having a chance to defend their innocence.

The element of class apartheid is also visible in this celebration of crossfires. People seem to think that those who are killed in this process are barely people at all. Because there is often a gulf of class difference between them and the criminals, they believe that those in the lower classes are out to get them. Rarely does it enter their mind that people of all classes, criminals or saints, have the same right to justice and must have their day in court with proper legal representation before they can be given strict punishment.

But that does not happen, and people like City Shaheen are killed.

We have courts for a reason. Everyone must have the opportunity to defend themselves, no matter how

awareness and understanding about legal recourses and justice among people, so that they don't celebrate such miscarriages of justice. At the present stage, people have become so pessimistic about the status quo that, instead of raising their voices to change it, they enthuse about its gross miscarriage that does nothing more than draw blood for blood. Educating them about what the justice system could be and should be would improve our chances of building up a bottom-up movement for reshaping our justice system, free of backlog and corruption, that can properly take charge of punishing criminals through legal means.

Also, if we don't want further sanctions from our foreign friends, we must stop our proclivities to justify the unjust use of force by state security forces.

A City Respite



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAAD MORTUZA

One of the pleasures of my daily commute to work is experiencing the lakefront at Hatirjheel. Not always can you write pleasure and commute in one sentence when it comes to Dhaka. I look at the disciplined queue of people availing water taxis, at a controlled number of public buses, reflecting on an ideal cityscape. I guess only our olive-clad brothers can claim such city serenity while staying not far from the maddening crowd. For the rest of Dhakaites, the place is a pleasant respite.

This integrated development of the Hatirjheel and Begunbari areas recently earned a bronze prize in the landscape architecture/urban design category awarded by the Architecture MasterPrize. In its citation, the award committee hails the "Urban Oasis" for symbolising "a remarkable example of environmental restoration and remain[ing] as a source of inspiration for environmental restorations throughout Bangladesh."

Little did the awarding agency know that inspiration is not an incentive for the current management authority of the project, which includes multiple stakeholders, including Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk), the Department of Environment, the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), and the city corporation. The sustainability of the project depends on the coordination among these

public offices. With the contract period for post-handover service coming to an end, the government agencies are back to their proverbial bureaucratic entanglement. The unkempt gardens and footpaths as well as the wears and tears are tell-tale signs of mismanagement.

While doing a background check for this piece, I came to learn that the annual maintenance cost of the project is about Tk 18 crore, Tk 7 crore of which is required to purify the lake water. The project runs on a deficit as only Tk 10 crore is earned through renting commercial spaces and other services. The intra-ministerial agencies are not willing to cover the deficit. On June 30, 2021, the High Court intervened with its directive to declare Hatirjheel as a public trust property. While the High Court's recommendations are ideal, one of them decreed the removal of commercial places like the eateries from the lakefront. Last month, a stay order on the High Court decision was issued by the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court. The status quo suggests a lack of planning in making the project sustainable for the long term.

Earlier this year, as if to symbolically protest the ill health of Hatirjheel, we had hundreds of dead fish shoring up to make a public statement. All is not well in the state of Hatirjheel (at least with the oxygen level in the water). Yet, this spot started with

a huge promise of changing our cultural map. For joggers, this can be a good spot for a run. For the aimless walkers, the waterside promenades featuring a dancing fountain and illuminated bridges offer a visual feast. For families, this is a pleasant respite after a day's work to spend some quality time close to nature. For commuters, this is a much-needed corridor that connects the two sides

Hatirjheel is a precious asset for Dhaka that needs our undivided attention. Given the presence of star-studded hotels in the vicinity, this place can be turned into a tourist spot with the right kind of investment. Its sustainability will depend on the right balance of environmental protection and resource management.

of Dhaka. From a city management perspective, Hatirjheel preserves a low-lying floodplain area to save our roads from being inundated during the monsoon.

The benefits are endless compared to the maintenance cost over which our agencies are quibbling. If they keep on ignoring the site, the next phase of restoration will be even more expensive.

The waste that travels from the surrounding areas such as Karwan Bazar, Panthapath, Dhanmondi,

Kalabagan, Kathalagan and Banglamotor will not stop falling into Hatirjheel. Unless the waste disposal system is enacted and systematically maintained, what promises to be a city lung can be a source of pollutants. For a city ranked among the top 10 unliveable ones, we can ill-afford another location that wreaks havoc on the environment.

There is currently another proposal of connecting Gulshan South Park and Gulshan Lakeway with Hatirjheel. The Dhaka North mayor has proposed expanding the waterway by elevating the land bridges that will improve the waterfront legacy of the capital. This is probably a good idea as it will increase water-based modes of transportation. The popularity of this alternative model can be used to encourage it in other canals and rivers. There have been several abortive attempts to introduce water taxis between Uttara/Ashulia and Sadarghat.

Hatirjheel is a precious asset for Dhaka that needs our undivided attention. Given the presence of star-studded hotels in the vicinity, this place can be turned into a tourist spot with the right kind of investment. The sustainability of the place will depend on the right balance of environmental protection and resource management. The beauty of the project can be further increased by making the local community its stakeholders. The building authority, Rajuk, for instance, can insist on maintaining strict colour codes that blend with the landscape. Many new real estate companies are trying to find outlets to bypass roads, which should be closely monitored.

Above all, security in Hatirjheel should be ensured to earn the confidence of visitors. Now and then, we hear that the police work in cahoots with the miscreants, which is symptomatic of another illness that the Hatirjheel witnesses on a daily basis.