

Could DSAC be any more unrealistic?

Its AI-driven signalling system signals how out-of-touch with reality it is

If there ever existed an award for the most perfect example of someone putting the cart before the horse, the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSAC) or those running it would be its top contender because of their move to install an artificial intelligence-driven signalling system in Dhaka. In one of the most congested cities in the world – where the rules of the jungle apply when it comes to traffic control – the idea would be comical if it did not mean the possibility of yet another bottomless pit for public funds to disappear in.

Our fears are substantiated by the fact that the DSAC has already spent Tk 119 crore of taxpayer's money to upgrade Dhaka's traffic signal system. This ambitious project was meant to give us digitised signal lights, solar powered timer countdowns and digital display boards on major intersections – yet here we are, still depending on a largely manual traffic management system, and currently ranked as the third-worst country on the World Traffic Index.

Experts have warned that such projects are a waste of time when even the fundamentals of traffic management are missing from Dhaka's streets – with both motorised and non-motorised vehicles plying the same road, lanes not being followed, and the flow of vehicles generally being much higher than the capacity of the roads. The unplanned influx of newer vehicles landing on our already overcrowded roads, poor road conditions, and even poorer public transport networks are only making the situation worse.

Added to that is the fact that the government's own Strategic Transport Plan, which involves clearing footpaths, connecting roads outside Dhaka, improving public transport management and more, is not being followed. And we all know that even a little bit of rain can clog Dhaka's streets, and make the city come to a standstill. In this situation, it seems almost ludicrous to suggest that an AI-driven signalling system can suddenly solve our traffic woes.

What is even more concerning is that, in their misplaced idealism, the DSAC has already paid Tk 5 crore to a consultant firm to conduct a feasibility study for running 53 of its designated traffic signal points with AI technology. Could this money not have been put to better use in a city that still depends on hand gestures from traffic police, as well as ropes, cones and bamboo fences on major roads, to regulate traffic?

The current government has pledged to make this country a Smart Bangladesh by 2041, and we can only assume that this ill-informed plan is the DSAC's attempt to keep up with this promise. But what it really shows is just how out-of-touch the city corporation truly is with reality. Perhaps, before taking this project any further or before any more similarly unrealistic projects are taken up to solve Dhaka's traffic nightmare, making the relevant authorities slightly more familiar with ordinary people's everyday reality should be made the first priority. We urge the authorities to undertake initiatives that actually deliver results on the streets.

Failure to address sexual abuse unacceptable

Education authorities must abide by HC verdict on sexual harassment cells

We find it deeply troubling that the High Court, yet again, had to remind education authorities to form committees to combat sexual harassment at all educational institutions. This is not the first time that the court issued such reminders to the education ministry and the University Grants Commission (UGC) to implement its 2009 verdict on forming such committees. On Tuesday, it also sought an explanation from the authorities for their inaction or rather refusal to adhere to the directive, and ordered the government to pass legislation based on its guidelines in this regard.

It should be noted that some sexual harassment cells have been established since the passing of the 2009 verdict. As a deputy director of UGC has recently told this newspaper, 45 out of 53 public universities, and 71 of 109 private universities, established anti-sexual harassment cells. These cells, however, appear to exist only on paper. After conducting a poll among students from 15 public and private universities, this paper discovered that although almost all of them had experienced sexual harassment or knew someone who had, 31.5 percent of students didn't know where to register complaints. When asked if they were aware of any cell where reports of harassment were filed, 77.4 percent gave a negative response. According to 59.1 percent of respondents, their universities don't hold any seminars, workshops, or other awareness programmes about where and how to file complaints in accordance with the HC regulation.

But even when a complaint is filed with a cell, abusers are not often brought to book, especially if they are connected with influential quarters. For example, on July 17 last year, a female student of Chittagong University filed a complaint after an attempted rape, but the authorities didn't take it into account even after protests erupted on campus. The abusers continue to receive the patronage of powerful parties and university authorities. This paints a dismal picture of the state of our educational institutions, one that must be corrected. No case of sexual harassment should go unpunished. The authorities must investigate all complaints of harassment and take proper action. As well as forming complaint cells and making them functional, it is vital that students are made aware of their existence and encouraged to seek redress.

But we must ask: why has the HC directive not been implemented in full yet? What's stopping the higher authorities from taking action that could really help rid their campuses of the scourge of sexual harassment? And what does it say about the rule of law in this country when an express directive of the court is disregarded year after year? We urge the higher authorities to take immediate action to resolve this issue. They must also pass legislation making the establishment of Anti-Sexual Harassment Cells mandatory at all educational institutions.

EDITORIAL

What's eating away at AL's bedrock?



THE STREET VIEW

Mohammad Al-Masum Molla
is deputy chief reporter at The Daily Star.

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Eminent writer Humayun Azad wrote a novel in 1995 titled "Shob Kichhu Bhenge Pore," which roughly translates to "everything falls apart." As if keeping with the literal spirit of the words, many things have fallen apart or collapsed in Bangladesh since then.

We have seen a bridge collapse even before its inauguration. We have seen factory buildings collapse like houses of cards. We have even witnessed the walls of houses built under the prime minister's Ashrayan Project start to crack within days of people moving into them. But most recently, we saw a stage, laden with budding Awami League leaders, collapse.

It was a grand event marking the 75th anniversary of the ruling Awami League's student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), and they had invited the party's spokesperson, Obaidul Quader, to address the ceremony. Just as the AL general secretary, surrounded by Chhatra League leaders, began his speech as chief guest, the stage caved in under the weight of the dignitaries gathered at it.

It was not, however, the first time that such a thing has happened in Bangladeshi politics with too many people on the stage. It has happened before, notably in Anwara of Chattogram when a BNP policymaker, Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, was delivering his speech.

Obaidul Quader recovered soon to stand up and resume his speech. He said, given the recent context of events, that the collapse was only inevitable. "But I'll have to say we don't need so many leaders on the stage. Actually, we don't need so many leaders. We need more activists. We don't need so many leaders. Instead of sitting in the front row, people are crowding the stage during programmes. Why? Why do we need so many leaders? We don't need to produce leaders. We need to produce party workers."

But Quader's call for more activists than leaders comes as a surprise. We all know that the ruling AL, one of the country's oldest political parties, finds its strength in its strong organisation



that stretches all the way to the grassroots of the country, where they have an army of dedicated activists and supporters. Grassroots leaders are the heart of the party.

So, what has changed that the party now feels the need for more activists? Isn't it an ominous sign for a party, which has been in office for three terms, to call for more activists?

After assuming office in 2009, the AL started establishing its dominance in politics. Due to its strength, and elimination or weakening of opposition forces, opposition activists started joining the ruling Awami League. The party's senior leaders, on several occasions, warned about such "hybrid" leaders or infiltrators. Seasoned party leaders alleged that the dedicated and tested leaders had been sidelined by the hybrids.

But again, it is the ruling party that paved the way for bureaucrats to meddle with politics. That's why we see that, from elections to relief distribution, bureaucrats are at the fore

The situation turned worse after the 2014 election, which gave a sense to ruling party members that securing a nomination or blessing from the party was enough to win the polls, since they would be virtually unopposed. This made businessmen desperate to get closer to power. And we saw a number of media reports stating that

of everything.

Bangladesh is just about a year away from its next parliamentary election. And this time, the situation is very challenging for the ruling party, compared to what it was in the last two elections of 2014 and 2018. After the death of HT Imam, co-chairman of the Awami League Election Steering

PHOTO: SUVRA KANTI DAS/PROTHOM ALO

Committee, there was a rumour that a former government official may take charge in his stead. But people have little idea about who it will finally be.

The recent outgoing cabinet secretary, Kabir Bin Anwar, went to Awami League president Sheikh Hasina's Dhamondi office a few days after beginning his post-retirement leave. Although party leaders are tight-lipped, inside sources say he might become the next head of the party's election steering committee.

When bureaucrats keep getting billed for the top election job in the most political of exercises, it is bound to turn away the party's seasoned, tested and dedicated leaders – along with their support base at the grassroots. An embarrassing stage collapse could well be an ominous sign of the party's bedrock caving in.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Russian Muppets or American Puppets?



Nina L Khrushcheva
is a Russian-American professor
of International Affairs at The New School, New York City.

NINA L KHRUSHCHEVA

Westerners have spent two decades wondering why the Russian people have fallen under the spell of Vladimir Putin. Diplomats, historians, economists, and pundits have all failed to provide a satisfying explanation. But where academics and strategists have failed, perhaps the denizens of Sesame Street, from Kermit the Frog to Elmo, might succeed.

It was 1996. My homeland was in the midst of "shock therapy" – the rapid liberalisation and privatisation of its economy by decree, after the Soviet Union's fall – and I was at Princeton working on my doctorate. One day, a report about Russia on CNN caught my attention. Unusually, it was not about a killing or business takeover or an oligarch's rise or fall – negative coverage delivered with a holier-than-thou tone that never failed to rattle. Instead, it is a seemingly positive story: the Muppets were headed to Moscow.

But listening to the CNN host's arrogant commentary, my relief quickly gave way to frustration. The establishment of a Sesame Street in Russia was not, apparently, an example of cultural cross pollination, enabled by the country's opening. Rather, Miss Piggy and Big Bird would ensure that American democratic sensibilities took root in the hearts and minds of children across the vast post-Soviet space. I changed the channel.

A children's television show, defined

by its positive messages about learning and sharing, was being twisted into propaganda, and used as yet another declaration of America's Cold War victory. But Russia had its own rich culture, which included not only Tolstoy and the Bolshoi, but also "Good Night, Little Ones!" – a Soviet children's show as clever and warm-hearted as Sesame Street.

Fortunately, the team behind Sesame Street did not succumb to the attitude of moral superiority and cultural contempt that pervaded US news reports. On the contrary, according to a new book by Natasha Lance Rogoff – who, in the early 1990s, was an executive producer in charge of bringing the Muppets to Russia – the story of the show's formation for Russian audiences was one of genuine cultural cooperation, not condescension or conquest.

In "Muppets in Moscow: The Unexpected Crazy True Story of Making Sesame Street in Russia," Lance Rogoff does not shy away from the story's political thread. She openly admits that USAID and then-Senator Joe Biden "spearheaded congressional support for an international Sesame Street," touting the Muppets as "ideal ambassadors to model democratic values and the benefits of a free-market economy to children in the former Soviet Union." But she also explains that "translating Sesame Street's ebullient

and idealistic outlook to Mother Russia was not only incredibly difficult, but also incredibly dangerous."

Lance Rogoff's narrative includes bizarre, sordid, and all-too-human details about the morbid racketeering of the early post-Soviet years, when journalists and businesspeople were murdered on spec and Miss Piggy

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could be embraced as a role model for the utterly ruthless. Her rationalising, normalising, and modernising of the post-Soviet system reminded me of David Remnick's insights, in his 1994 book "Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire," into how Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika transformed Russia.

Perhaps most important, Lance Rogoff shows that, even if Russia's Sesame Street was fundamentally an American show, it was not about America. It certainly was not designed to serve as American propaganda. Instead, it depicted basic human values like friendship and communication – as much for the Russians and Americans who put the show together as for viewers across the former Soviet Union.

Watching Sesame Street while on a visit to Moscow in 1996 – not long after

seeing that CNN report – I was pleased to encounter a generous, sweet, and very well-produced show, which contained tie-in stories from the American original as well as unique stories with Russian puppets. The show's creators had clearly worked hard to develop characters that would resonate with Russians, from the problem-solving orange monster Kubik to the imaginative pink Muppet Businka. Zeliboba – a fuzzy, red-nosed house spirit, dressed in a leaf-covered cloak – was probably the most interesting (and certainly the most polarising).

The key was to show, not tell – to act in good faith, with decency and humanity, rather than delivering contemptuous, self-aggrandising lectures. In the 1990s, Russians were mimicking all things American. But they were also deeply conflicted, as reflected in the debates Lance Rogoff describes over Rachmaninoff and rock and roll. Russian culture is marked by extremes, and the oscillation between imitating Western models and violently rejecting them is no exception.

Russian children watched Sesame Street for nearly 15 years – until 2010. Lance Rogoff says it was taken off the air because Putin no longer saw any use for it. The fact that many other cultural collaborations also ended at around the same time supports her case. Putin had decided that Russian culture must be of and by Russians – and only he could decide what Russianness meant.

In the 1990s, Russian society was so shattered by the breakdown of the communist order that it lost touch with its own values. But that did not mean it was going to become an American knockoff. Sesame Street worked because it embodied universal values. One wonders whether the Russian reality would be different today if more Americans had understood this.