

There's a new kit in town

Locally developed Covid testing kit opens a new window for Bangladesh

It is heartening to know that local researchers have developed a new RT-PCR testing kit that can apparently detect coronavirus infections much more effectively than other RT-PCR kits in the country. Developed by a team led by Bangladesh Council of Science and Industry Research (BCSIR), it comes off a year-long trial run where it showed 98 percent sensitivity to the virus. RT-PCR kits are developed by targeting different coronavirus genes, so any change in the gene structure of the virus due to mutation can make them unable to detect it. But the BCSIR kit was developed by targeting a gene that usually does not change over time, making it highly durable and effective, even in asymptomatic cases.

We congratulate the team that has developed the kit, which has already been approved for commercial use. We are told that 500,000 kits will be produced initially – each will cost Tk 250. The low cost of production is an added advantage, as it promises to take a substantial burden off the government which still relies on imported kits. The kits currently in use at the 57 government-run and 105 private-run RT-PCR testing laboratories are imported from China, South Korea and the US. Already, a huge amount of foreign currency has been spent to import such kits, with more than 1.34 crore samples tested using the RT-PCR method alone. Moving away from this obligation will be a relief amid the ongoing forex reserve crisis.

Although coronavirus is far less of a threat than it used to be in the country – with January 2023 recording the second lowest rate of infections since the pandemic broke out – the threat, for those vulnerable, is still potent, requiring continued vaccination and testing. Testing kits will play an important role even if/when Covid-19 transitions into an ordinary seasonal virus. While we welcome the air of positivity surrounding the new RT-PCR kit, we must say that the role of policymakers in this regard has so far been rather frustrating. Far from encouraging local development or production of testing kits and vaccine, we have seen how bureaucratic red tape and politicisation of private efforts thwarted progress.

The global scientific community is working hard to make test kits and vaccines more easily available across the world. There are already talks of preparation for future pandemics, and building domestic capacity is going to be an important part of that preparation. Bangladesh, despite the suffering and uncertainty it had suffered because of heavy reliance on high-income countries for vaccines, is yet to signal readiness to turn lessons into initiatives. Its project to build a vaccine plant and research centre of its own is yet to take off in any meaningful way.

This must change. The current low positivity rate is a matter of relief, of course, but it must not distract us from the challenges that lie ahead. The government should support initiatives that can make us self-sufficient in testing kits and vaccines in the future, and strengthen our biotechnology industry through investment in training and research. It must also further strengthen our public health infrastructure.

Battered, deprived of justice

Plight of OCC-linked survivors of sexual abuse is a wake-up call

The One-stop Crisis Centres (OCC) for women and child survivors of sexual violence have been an important initiative of the government. The idea is to provide all required services, including legal, in one place. But as data from the women and children affairs ministry has recently shown, even such a laudable step hasn't led to the desired outcome of justice. Data related to cases filed by users of the services of 14 OCCs and their 67 cells in sadar hospitals and upazila health complexes shows that the OCCs have served 56,024 women and children over the last 22 years. But of the 17,093 cases filed, only 1,909 have received a verdict. More alarmingly, criminals have received punishment in only 220 of the cases – a meagre one percent.

This is quite disturbing. There is no question about the importance of the services offered by the OCCs, including DNA testing, legal assistance, counselling, rehabilitation, etc. For the victims of violence, sexual abuse, and acid and burn attacks, these can have life-changing impacts. But all these are also a means to an end: justice. To prepare survivors to get past their trauma and rebuild their life – only to see their pursuit of justice delayed indefinitely or denied – puts the whole exercise into question. Add to this all the social and legal challenges that survivors have to endure during trial. Many of them come from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the absence of proper family support, the OCCs are their last hope of getting justice. Yet, they continue to be failed by the state's justice system.

Unfortunately, the extremely low conviction rate for rape and sexual violence cases is a reality shared by not just OCC-linked survivors, but all survivors in general. According to a 2021 estimate, the conviction rate for rape cases in the country stands at a jarring three percent. It shows how those accused of violence often escape punishment using various legal loopholes and their political connections. For instance, Manusher Jonno Foundation, after analysing 25 rape cases filed between 2012 and 2016, found that all the accused had received bail between 24 hours and 15 days of arrest, despite the offence not being a bailable one under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000. It is an exception in one section of the act that is being misused to let rapists roam free, while survivors are made to sit through long days of waiting for justice that may elude them forever.

We must reverse this situation. We urge the relevant authorities to treat cases of sexual abuse and violence with the utmost seriousness. Survivors of such horrific crimes deserve nothing less than that. The justice system, law enforcement agencies, local administrations and society at large must all do their part to help victims get justice. Perpetrators of sexual violence must be punished.

Who killed democracy in Bangladesh?



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (ret'd) is a former associate editor of The Daily Star.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

Obaidul Quader is an oft-quoted person – and for good reasons. I, too, shall quote him at the start of this column. Following the very recent by-elections to the parliament seats vacated by BNP members, he is reported to have said, “Democracy has won.” And he is certain to flaunt the World Democracy Report that shows Bangladesh improving by two ranks. However, there is little to take comfort in the report since, in reality, our acquired marks remain the same; it's only that two countries have done worse than us.

The minister has cited the “peaceful atmosphere” that prevailed during the polling on February 1. Indeed, it was very peaceful. When fewer than 20 percent of voters turn up to vote, it is bound to be peaceful. When the opposition voters are told not to bother to come to the polling stations, it is bound to be “peaceful.” When an opposition candidate goes into hiding, unable to withstand the pressure on him, peace is bound to follow. The recent by-polls represent the state of democracy in our country fairly accurately. The near-empty polling booths, if nothing, displays a lack of trust; in fact, it demonstrates people's apathy towards elections and voting. Most voters feel it is an exercise in futility under the present circumstances, the results a forgone conclusion.

This was the picture in 2014 and 2018 as well. “People couldn't cast their votes in that (December 30, 2018) election... They couldn't vote in the union parishad and upazila parishad polls.” These are not my words but that of a leading member of the ruling party's coalition – the president of the Workers' Party. It is a sign of democratic regression set in motion a decade ago, and in this regard, the prognosis of Levitsky and Ziblatt, who in their both educative and frightening book *Why Democracies Die*, say, “Democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box.”

Thus, the quinquennial exercise, the national election, always brings forth pious utterances of the political parties – the two main ones in particular – about the state of democracy, how it has been reduced to nothingness by the



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

other party, and of resuscitating it if elected to power. And the most voluble is the ruling party, who goes into overdrive trying to nullify the oppositions' criticism of its alleged disservice to political and economic egalitarianism. The ruling party has the added advantage, in addition to the public platform, of hogging the time and space of the parliament where, unlike a normal functioning legislature, it goes unchallenged in the absence of an opposition, unanswerable for its plans, policies, actions and deeds. It needs reminding ourselves that the current character of the parliament is unique in that the official parliamentary opposition is also represented in the cabinet.

It is no wonder, therefore, that democracy has come under criticism at home and is being subjected to scrutiny by our friends outside, for which the ruling party has taken umbrage. In this regard, very few can take issue with the Awami League when it decries outsiders' attempt to serve us homilies on democracy or elections. No self-respecting citizen can accept that and should vehemently oppose such attempts.

But we need to be reminded from time to time what the stances of the major political parties have been on various national and political issues in the past. For example, in 1994, the Awami League had no qualms in accepting mediation by the then Commonwealth Secretary-General Emeka Anyaoku, and accepted his representative Sir Ninian Stephen to sit between it and the BNP at the negotiating table. While the Awami League may not like to remember the role India played in 2014, history has not failed to record it. Were it not for the turncoats in Jatiya Party, who rebelled against Ershad or were compelled by circumstances to do so and participate in the 2014 election, things might have been different.

While one may not like to hear our development partners say that they would be watching the next elections very carefully, we have to lump it because we have afforded them the opportunity to comment on the state of our democracy. Hopes of a new dawn following our liberation was belied, first with the introduction of, though very short-lived, one-party rule, and then by changes brought

Sometimes, Quader reveals the real state of politics in the country. He is reported to have said recently at a public meeting, “We have not been able to make politics interesting... no good people want to join politics now. No educated, honest person wants to do politics. But they should. Otherwise, politics will lack character” (*Dhaka Tribune*, January 8, 2023). We wonder whether the minister has ever given a thought as to why it is that the good and the educated don't join politics. Politics does not only lack character, it lacks substance too. What we have today is a hybrid democracy where people have become irrelevant and clinging to power has become the be-all and end-all of politics.

The four indicators that Levitsky and Ziblatt warn us to look out for when democracy is in regression are “rejection of (or weak commitment to) the democratic rules of the game, denial of the legitimacy of political opponent, toleration or encouragement of violence. Readiness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media.” For the observant political observers, these should ring a bell.

Biman's never-ending turbulence



THE OUTSPOKEN ONE

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

ANUPAM DEBASHIS ROY

Like anyone else, I get quite nervous when a plane starts shaking mid-air. It's only when the calm voice of the captain or the cabin crew says, “We are encountering some minor turbulence, it will be over soon,” that I relax. But if I were to get on a Biman Bangladesh Airlines flight, I would be nervous from the get-go.

And why would I not? It seems as though the management is failing – or simply does not care enough – to live up to our expectations that our national flag carrier would provide an affordable and quality service. Taxpayers' money is spent to maintain an airline instead of leaving air travel solely in the hands of the private sector, because we view air travel as an essential service that the government must provide as a public good. However, Biman's performance can hardly be termed as a source of satisfaction, let alone pride.

There are, sadly, a plethora of complaints against Biman that have come to light. Let's start with the issue of recruitment. In October, examination papers for a recruitment test for various positions in the airline were leaked and, reportedly, high officials of the air carrier were involved in it. Because of the leak,

the recruitment process had to be suspended.

The pilot recruitment process has also been corrupted. In February last year, 14 pilots were appointed to Biman, all of whom became the subject of an investigation after the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) sent a letter to the civil aviation ministry. According to reports by investigative agencies, these pilots were hired instead of giving at least 30 existing Biman pilots their due promotions. Even worse, in many cases, they were hired from other airlines from which they had either been sacked or denied promotion.

The most flagrant was the case of Sadia Ahmed, whose husband was on the recruitment committee and allegedly bent the rules in her favour. Ahmed reportedly did not have the required 300 flying hours needed to qualify for operating a Boeing 777 aircraft. Also, she had been sacked before by Regent Airways and US-Bangla Airlines. Why, then, was she appointed to operate our national flag carrier?

Since the controversy became publicly known through the media, the appointment of nine pilots was cancelled. But, it's not only the

new pilots who are questionable. According to a report published in this newspaper, two Biman pilots willfully jeopardised the lives of their passengers and about 500 others by concealing the fact that the engines of the plane they were flying had been damaged due to the captain's inappropriate mid-flight procedures. According to the law, the penalty for such a crime is life imprisonment. But instead of penalising them, the Biman authorities promoted one of those pilots to fly long distance flights. Fortunately, the promotion was revoked a day after this newspaper contacted the carrier to inquire about the investigations into the event and the pilots involved.

There are numerous other incidents involving Biman's inefficiency and mismanagement, ranging from making losses year after year, owing money to various organisations, and keeping new aircraft underutilised, to cancelling flights to several destinations, providing subpar customer service, and causing callous accidents on the grounds of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA). All of this happened in just one year (2022), which also happened to be its 50th year of service.

For example, on November 17, at the HSIA, a Biman ground handling equipment collided with a Gulf Air Boeing 787, damaging the main body of the aircraft and taking it out of operation. Previously, on April 10, a Biman Boeing 777-300ER collided with a carrier Boeing 737-800 while it was being brought into the hangar. Not only were Biman's planes damaged in such incidents;

other foreign carriers' aircraft have also been damaged in recent years as a result of the Biman personnel's incompetence. Reportedly, two Turkish Airlines jets were damaged in a similar manner not long ago.

The inefficiency and incompetence of the Biman staff is no secret anymore. The government has noted it to such a level that the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) has decided to appoint an international firm at the new third terminal of the airport for the job.

This is utterly irresponsible and unacceptable. Biman is a public asset and therefore is duty-bound to provide good service. With such poor conditions of pilots and staff, Biman will not be able to compete with other airlines and will continue to endanger its passengers and the prestige of the country. It is high time Biman was overhauled to make it efficient. Corruption and nepotism must be rooted out of the organisation. The entire system needs to be accountable and the responsible parties for the misdeeds listed above must be brought to book.

Biman has a long way to go to meet modern aviation standards. The airline must address its poor on-time performance, inadequate in-flight services and amenities, and ineffective management if it is to regain the trust and loyalty of its customers. Only then can it hope to compete with other international carriers and establish itself as a world-class airline. Otherwise, we will never be able to get a “Smart Airline” for a “Smart Bangladesh.”