

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

We deserve free and inclusive polls

Bangladesh's democracy will not survive another controversial election

The government is reportedly looking to go all out to make the next general election inclusive, which is essential to saving our wobbling democracy from descending into a major crisis. The extreme level of adversarial politics and democratic deficit that have plagued our nation for more than a decade have eroded the foundations of our key institutions, led to deterioration of rule of law and human rights, and held us back from developing a politically mature society. That is why, above all, we want fair and inclusive polls – a sentiment which, we believe, is shared by the overwhelming majority of our population.

After the experiences of the last two general elections – and several local level elections – there is a widespread sense of doubt that has crept in among voters about the credibility of our elections. It falls upon the government to convince both the general population and the opposition parties that it is sincere about creating a truly level playing field. Unfortunately, the derailment tactics used by the AL against BNP programmes over the last months – that too with the help of state apparatuses at times – have thus far failed to ignite confidence in the ruling party's previous assurances.

The recently concluded by-elections to six parliamentary constituencies, although relatively peaceful, left much to be desired, given the low voter turnout, widespread intimidation and harassment during campaigns in all those constituencies, to the mysterious disappearance (and reappearance) of one contestant. Although the incumbent Election Commission (EC) showed some promise with a few of its actions in the beginning – particularly in comparison to its weaker predecessor – it has not been able to keep up that momentum, and seems to have fallen back on old practices of toying the party line.

The clear absence of voters is a strong message for the government as to how little faith citizens now have in our electoral system. The reality is that genuine electoral reforms alone can reignite voter interest ahead of the next general election, and ensure the participation of all political parties in it.

The BNP, on the other hand, must also cooperate with the ruling party and the EC to come to an acceptable compromise to ensure its participation. Any genuine outreach by the government should be welcomed and met by the BNP with an equally genuine willingness to negotiate a solution to the current political impasse that has brewed over time. The BNP should carefully analyse the pros and cons of boycotting another election (which it has threatened to do on a few occasions), particularly in light of what its boycott of the 2014 general elections has cost the party and the country in general.

Ultimately, the country cannot afford a repeat of another boycotted election like that of 2014, nor can it afford another controversial election such as the one in 2019. We have lost a lot of ground in regard to our democracy because of them. We hope the EC will take all necessary measures to fulfil its constitutional obligation of delivering a free and fair election to the people – a precondition of which is to ensure the inclusion of the major political parties.

A war of egos that continues to devastate

One year on, why is there no willingness to end the Russia-Ukraine war?

Today marks one year since Russia advanced into Ukraine with assaults by sea, land, and air – giving way to what many have opined are the worst war-borne consequences since the Second World War. And – as we did in this column on February 26, 2022 – we reiterate our condemnation for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which continues to cause blisters of conflict and tension all over the world. No doubt, the conflict that began a year ago had been in the making for over a decade. But the fact that it has been allowed to escalate to the point of such a wide-spanning war speaks to our collective failure to prioritise peace.

The human cost of this war in particular is unjustifiable, with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights recently deploring that at least 8,006 civilians have died and 13,287 have been injured over the past 12 months. To say nothing of the dire ways in which this war has disrupted the livelihoods of the affected citizens. And the situation now only seems to be getting worse.

Just on Tuesday, President Vladimir Putin declared that Russia is suspending participation in the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty with the United States, accusing the West of being directly involved in attempts to attack its strategic air bases. Signed between President Obama and President Medvedev in 2010, the treaty is the last remaining nuclear arms control pact between the two countries which collectively hold 90 percent of the world's nuclear warheads.

The stoking of the fire by the West is undeniable. In particular, its practice of not heeding Russia's security concerns has been a constant. But, at the end of the day, the onus is squarely on Russia for resorting to such intense and unflinching aggression in the first place instead of exploring all the available avenues of peace.

And now, as all had predicted, the tremendous effects of this war in Europe continue to spill over into the rest of the world, with common citizens of many countries, including Bangladesh, having to face hiked prices of essential commodities that threaten to choke them to poverty. Essentially, the consequences of this war have pushed millions more towards devastatingly lower living standards just as economies were preparing to somewhat recover from the pandemic. Meanwhile, it has been disappointing to see some nations, especially those bordering Russia, egging on the perpetuity of violence rather than trying to encourage dialogue.

Still, we must demand that this war reach a peaceful conclusion before even more damage is inflicted upon innocent citizens. The international community, instead of sticking to sides, must push for resolution. War is never good news for any party involved, and this has been starkly exemplified by the current financial collapse being experienced worldwide. As always, it is only through dialogue and compromise that lasting and necessary peace can be achieved.

President, Presidency and Democracy

Should the selection process be so arbitrary?



THE THIRD VIEW

Mahfuz Anam
is the editor and publisher of
The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

The first thing that one needs to remember about our president is that he does not represent the government, let alone the party that selects and later elects him. He represents the state in all its magnificence – the people, culture, history, heritage, etc. The irony is that all of us remember this, except the ruling party of the day. The BNP did not when it ruled, and the Awami League is not doing so now.

So how does a president balance the interest between the party that elects him and the nation that he represents? How does a president serve democracy with all his obligations being to the party that elects him? Should he reflect the expectations of only the ruling party? What about that of the nation? Should it be just another post to be occupied by the ruling party of the day, without any set criteria? Should all the pomp and pageantry, the protocols, not to mention the expenses on taxpayers, mean nothing more than being an extension of the ruling party?

Questions are endless and the answers, sadly, are partisan. If asked, the rulers will hold us guilty even for asking. The other side will, of course, laud us for exemplary journalism. Until, of course, the roles are reversed. No norms, no ethics, no bigger picture, only partisan considerations – that is how we have compromised most of our crucial institutions, including the presidency.

What we saw in the just concluded election of the president is that the ruling party's parliamentary wing – representing 305 members out of a total of 350 MPs – met and authorised Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to select a candidate on their behalf.

That's precisely what the prime minister did. She made her own selection, kept it to herself and, on the date, just before the submission of the nomination papers, she made it known to a select few – excluding the candidate himself, who said in an interview that he knew nothing till minutes before signing his nomination papers.

We know that everything is decided by our prime minister. As the leader of the House and head of the government,

the constitution empowers her to do so – even when it comes to choosing the president. But shouldn't there be a difference between the way a party functionary is selected and the way a presidential candidate is?

Before every party election, the leader is given the sole power by the councillors and delegates to select nominees for every important post. In this case, too, the Awami League parliamentary party did the same, and so did the leader. Should a party position and the occupant of the highest constitutional post be filled in the same manner? Should it be so arbitrary, so narrowly focused, and so personalised?



Shouldn't there be a difference between the way a party functionary is selected and the way a presidential candidate is?

PHOTO: PID

Our president is the head of state. According to Article 48 (2) of the constitution, he takes precedence above all others. Every act of parliament, every law, every treaty, every constitutional appointment, every year's budget – the list can go on – is sent for his signature to become operative. If that is how "central" this "ceremonial" position is, then shouldn't the occupant of that position be selected with more circumspection?

Then there is the question of the president's "moral authority." Though the position is almost totally devoid of any executive power, it is more

than made up by undefined and all-encompassing "moral authority." It is a very significant component of the post. It is an office of prestige, of impeccable credentials, of ethics, of values, and of unquestioned acceptability. Take away the moral authority from the post, and what is left is a cipher. So when we trivialise the process of how we select our presidential candidate, we trivialise that "moral authority" and end up losing a vital element of democracy – the "moral presidency."

A government cannot always be totally moral, but a president has to be. Political expediency is a constant reality of a government. But it can never be that of a president. It does not mean that presidents don't have political affiliations. Mostly do, but it can never be their sole credential. The "highest protocol" position was patterned to be kept above politics so that if occasions arise, the president can play the part of the "big conciliator." But this he can only do if he enjoys the trust, confidence and "acceptability" of all parties.

posts and a party loyalist, as president.

To Sheikh Hasina's great credit, when she first assumed power in 1996, she tried to restore the traditional neutrality of the president by electing – in face of tremendous resistance from party stalwarts – Shahabuddin Ahmed, former chief justice and former acting president (during the transition from autocracy to an elected government) as the president from 1996 to 2001. It was a bold and visionary move and could have changed the nature of our presidency, and may be of our politics. However, the example was not followed up.

BNP, on the contrary, tried to further consolidate party political hold over the presidency by dragging their own president – Dr Badruddoza Chowdhury – into controversy on the floor of the House, insulting him and forcing him to resign for faults that were never made public. This killed the possibility of ever having a non-partisan president that Sheikh Hasina's action had sparked. From then on, it was a fast slide down the road of totally partisan presidents.

We write today to underscore how, over the last 32 years, since Ershad's fall and the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh, we have failed to give institutional shape to democracy. One by one, we destroyed or made dysfunctional the institutions that make democracy work: the legislative, the judiciary, the independent constitutional watchdog bodies, the independent media, etc. In a nutshell, there is no accountability system in our whole governance process.

We wrote earlier and we repeat here that the most significant failure – the one that shouldn't have happened at all – is the practical dysfunctionality of parliament. Today, instead of raising the vital questions of public interest, it has been made into a publicly funded platform of government propaganda and denigration of the opposition, even though there is hardly any.

With all other institutions having their roles shrunk, we became a democracy solely focused on elections. And when elections became highly questionable, we even lost that – the one process through which some semblance of accountability could have been ensured.

This daily headlined yesterday that the government may go for inclusive polls this time around. We really hope so. However, the way our new president was chosen, and the publicly announced reasons for choosing him – his long-standing and unwavering party loyalty – have further pushed that possibility into question.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

A Farewell to Russia



Anastasia Edel
is the author of 'Putin's
Playground: Empire, Revolution,
and the New Tsar.'

ANASTASIA EDEL

It has now been a year since Russia, my birthplace, invaded Ukraine. For 365 days, we have been waking up to news of Russian missile strikes, bombings, murders, torture, and rape. It has been 365 days of shame and confusion, of wanting to turn away but needing to know what is happening, of watching Russians become "ruscists," "Orks," or "putinoids." For 365 days, the designation "Russian-American," previously straightforward, has felt like a contradiction in terms.

For those in my situation, some methods of adapting to the new circumstances have come easier than others. Russian books still crowd my bookcase, but I no longer have any wish to re-read them. Chekhov and Nabokov cannot be blamed for the aggression against Ukraine, but it nonetheless has stolen their magic and their capacity to teach. These authors were my friends, as were the old-country rituals like Russian Easter vigils and New Year's screenings of the Soviet classic *Irony of Fate*. I feel the loss acutely, but perhaps it is for the better. It helps me concentrate on the present.

Other changes have required more soul-searching. Every Russian in the West used to feel like an envoy of a

great culture and a great country. In the West, the romantic appeal of Russia's stated priorities – communal over individualistic, socialist over capitalist, spiritual over material, heart over head – was so strong that I, too, became convinced of Russia's hidden goodness, even though I had left the country as soon as I could in the 1990s.

Now, I am reminded why. Russia is special, but mainly in the sense that it is uniquely capable of destroying, in a matter of days, what took centuries to build. From Tchaikovsky's harmonies to Pushkin's verses, Russian culture has been besmirched by people whose atrocities have negated their ancestors' achievements. Russia has been dragged back to the barbaric customs of Muscovy, as if the 19th century never happened.

As someone who was shaped by Russian and Soviet literature, I have been made to feel like an unwilling partner to Russian crimes. That is why, since last February, I have abandoned any pretence of being a cultural envoy. In some ways, it has been liberating. I now know that one's search for meaning need not – and sometimes must not – be confined to any cultural tradition.

Still, it isn't easy questioning your own past. Flipping through family albums, we used to see our grandfathers as heroes who had survived the great terror, won the great war, and built a great country. They suffered so that their grandchildren could live in peace (and "they," of course, included Ukrainians).

But those sacrifices have been squandered. We now must consider the possibility that our grandparents' achievements merely extended the life of a totalitarian monster, imparting to it the legitimacy that it craved. How should we think about the 23-27 million Soviet citizens who died in the 20th century's war against fascism? Many of them were the grandparents of the 21st century's own fascists.

This answer wasn't so straightforward just a few years ago. After the end of the Cold War, Russia seemed like the freest country in the world. It was also believed to be a country capable of repentance. The fact that nobody was called to answer for the communist regime's crimes was viewed as proof of our collective desire for national healing, rather than as a deliberate effort by the new authorities to clear themselves of any blame.

Today, Putin's war on Ukraine is being directed, supplied, and supported by Russians who, like me, lived through *perestroika* and *glasnost*. They have wasted that era's promise and built another prison "on the ruins of despotism." What felt like a conscious national choice in the 1990s turned out to be an aspiration of the few. The very idea of "national choice" seems like a hollow concept now. Russians exist only as subjects,

their society an atomised mass where some just try to survive, and others cheer on the regime's crimes so that they can forget about their own misery for a while. Those brave few who stand up to defy the system end up being swallowed by it.

To be Russian today is to be culturally hollowed out. For those of us with half our lives behind us, it is not as though we can simply adopt a new set of favourite books, movies or holiday traditions. You can read Gogol and explore Ukrainian folk songs, but you cannot adopt a Ukrainian identity, because it would feel immoral even to try. All you can do is dissolve into the background and hope nobody asks where you got your accent. When you cheer for Ukraine, you do it quietly from the sidelines.

What are we to do with our memories, family sagas, and earlier exalted perceptions of our place in the "historical process" (as the Marxists used to put it)? Since the past cannot be cancelled, it must be either repressed or deglamorised for the sake of the present and the future. Everything now hinges on the outcome of the war. If Ukraine wins and Putin's regime falls, it may still be possible for Russia to rehabilitate itself someday – as Germany once did.

That will be a task for every decent person – Russians and everyone else – to advance when the time comes. But even with a hoped-for Ukrainian victory, there will be no return to the past when Russia existed as a unique civilisation. That Russia, real or imagined, expired on February 24, 2022. Let us drink to the departed.