

EC must do more to return power to voters

Business-as-usual approach will not create the right condition for free polls

This week marks one year of the incumbent Election Commission (EC) in office, which also coincided with the National Voters' Day. Far from being an occasion for celebration, however, the reigning mood appears to be one of trepidation, with the general election less than a year away. The biggest worry is, will people again be denied the opportunity to exercise their franchise? As things stand, it seems unlikely that the EC will succeed in holding free and fair elections. Despite all the talk of creating a level playing field for the political parties, so far, it has failed to make any progress in that respect. The ruling Awami League has routinely gotten away with obstructing political programmes held by BNP in the most blatant of ways.

While demands made by the ruling party have been given priority over the concerns expressed by the opposition – for example, over the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs) – another factor that is of great concern is the negligible involvement of voters in the election process. Tussles between the main political parties have dominated the election narrative ever since this EC took over a year ago, just like they did during the tenures of the previous two ECs. And the role and space for voters have continued to shrink to historic lows. The appalling voter turnout in recent local elections and parliamentary by-polls illustrated the lack of confidence in the EC's ability – partly due to the partisan role of the administration and partly due to its own unwillingness to take firm action – to oversee a fair transfer of power. That, of course, should come as no surprise after what happened during the last two general elections of 2014 and 2018.

Besides the endless political controversies, harassment and intimidation of voters, denying them the chance to vote for their preferred candidates and, in some cases, forcing them to vote for specific candidates, fraudulent voting in secret booths, ballot box stuffing, and many other irregularities during the last two elections have all but destroyed our democratic process, as well as voters' willingness to participate in such farcical exercises. Unfortunately, despite initial promise, the current EC has been unable to reverse that perception with its questionable handling of election-related irregularities. Many have rightly raised the question that if the EC cannot control the administration and law enforcement personnel during local elections, what hope does it have of doing so during the general elections where the stakes are much higher?

The EC itself has done little to alleviate such concerns. And the recent statement by the chief election commissioner – that political parties should participate in the election of their own volition, as the EC cannot do anything more to persuade them – is deeply worrying. How can the EC expect that when the conditions it has created so far are nowhere near satisfactory? For the sake of our democracy – or whatever is left of it anyway – the EC must do more to fulfil its constitutional mandate. It must ensure that power is returned to the people after two controversial and largely non-participatory elections.

Dhanmondi Lake needs to be protected

Politics, greed and negligence threaten to compromise its integrity

In a city of sparse greenery, it's worrying how the few parks, playgrounds and such open spaces that are still there are being commercialised and compromised in various ways. Dhanmondi Lake is one such area that has been losing its greenery because of the way it is being exploited by a politico-commercial nexus amid poor oversight by Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC). The presence of so many food joints and their activities as well as unchecked littering and pollution have led to not only a distortion of the original lake plan, but also an unhealthy environment within the lake area.

According to a report by Prothom Alo, the area is divided into seven sectors. Six of them have been leased to six Awami League leaders, while the seventh is in the process of being leased. Leasing, in this case, involves a responsibility not only for the food stalls but also surrounding water and land areas. Which means that the lessees have to carry out necessary security, maintenance and cleaning related activities of their own volition. In reality, emboldened by their political connections, the lessees and those running the 13 restaurants that are currently located there hardly feel the need to abide by these conditions, which are vital to preserve the lake. As a result, it is being increasingly transformed into a commercial space, which is disturbing.

If commercialisation, encroachment of spaces meant for walking, and unchecked littering are a threat to the physical integrity of the lake, criminal gangs and activities present a different kind of threat. As per local residents, besides littering and shrinking of grass-covered spaces, a major concern is the activities of drug addicts and youth criminal gangs. This has raised concerns about the security of visitors, especially at night. On October 22, a marine engineer named Shahadat Hossain Majumder was reportedly killed by muggers in the lake area.

Clearly, the DSCC needs to do a much better job of protecting this lake at the heart of the capital. It must start by reviewing its decision to lease out parts of the lake or allow so many commercial establishments there, even though the law prohibits leasing or transforming of such open spaces and lakes. We cannot help but wonder, why would the authorities still do that? Why would they allow distorting the original lake plan? Unfortunately, not only Dhanmondi Lake, the DSCC has leased several other such spaces as well. For example, at the Bahadur Shah Park in Old Dhaka, leasing made way for invasive food stalls.

Thus, green, open spaces where residents can go for clear air and relaxation are fast disappearing from our city. The authorities, especially the city corporations, must take steps to check this dangerous trend. They must terminate lease contracts that violate the law or at least ensure those are followed properly.

Securing the safety of ordinary students

The real culprit is BCL's 'sense of entitlement'



THE THIRD VIEW

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MAHFUZ ANAM

We are delighted by the High Court decision to suspend all five members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) unit at the Islamic University (IU) who were involved in the torture of Phulpuri, a first-year student. The court also asked to remove the hall provost concerned and ensure a seat for the victim. (The BCL also expelled the same group from the organisation. We will know if it is for real if it triggers a wider expulsion process of all members with similar reputation.)

While passing the order, the bench of Justice JBM Hassan and Justice Razik-Al-Jalil expressed grave concern and observed, "We have noticed from the media that some unruly students are participating in untoward incidents by using their political identities, which is tarnishing the glorious history of student politics."

The point about "using political identities" is important. The ruling party members, especially the activists of BCL, think their political affiliation gives them immunity from law, from rules, from norms – from everything that limits their unbridled power. (The way our law enforcement agencies treat the BCL in general proves their assumption to be correct.)

The current story of Phulpuri, a fresher at the Islamic University in Kustia, who went public about her physical and psychological torture at the hands of IU BCL's women activists, gives us a glimpse of what goes on in the name of student activities on public university campuses. Phulpuri was guilty of staying in a residential hall – named after our prime minister, Deshratna Sheikh Hasina Hall (one would have hoped that since the hall bears the leader's name, an attempt would be made to set it up as a model hall with ideal behaviour by all, especially the BCL) – without the permission of the BCL's hall leadership. She was asked to see one of them, which she did after 48 hours. Such defiance needed a lesson to be taught, and thus began her journey of four hours of torture – from 11 pm to 3:30 am – on the night of February 12. Usually, a victim is so frightened that she either runs away from the dorms or, if the situation is so dire that she cannot do so, she accepts and keeps totally mum about her humiliation and sufferings. (Many of the past victims we tried to talk to outright refused, saying "You have no idea about the repercussions.")

But Phulpuri was made of sterner stuff. The daughter of a rickshaw van puller, whose father has hauled his three-wheeler for years through



The real malaise is the 'sense of entitlement' that appears to dominate the belief system of the BCL members, who feel they literally own the public universities.

FILE PHOTO: COLLECTED

monsoon rain and summer heat to pay for her education. She herself, being determined to change her fate, was not to be dissuaded by the likes of Sanjida, the vice-president of the IU BCL unit who planned and executed the torture. Phulpuri went public and complained to the university authorities and the media, which resulted in two separate inquiries – one by the university and the other by the District Administration at the behest of the High Court.

Both reports detail what Phulpuri was subjected to, including physical attacks and being forced to "touch the feet" of Sanjida in supplication to seek forgiveness. She, at one stage, in front of other residents, ordered those present to each slap Phulpuri in turn as a punishment. The torture continued in front of the provost. She was also confined to a room and a video was made of her torture – which is currently untraceable, but the High Court has ordered it to be produced.

The description is vivid: the torture she suffered is horrendous, the behaviour of the hall administration totally unforgivable. The sad part of it is that today it is not uncommon.

Why has the BCL's treatment of fellow students gotten so rotten? There are, of course, many factors: lack of ideology, deterioration of moral values, the parent organisation's own degradation, the overriding corruption,

they please. Everything that can lead to financial benefits and enhancement of their power base has to go through them. In many ways, they constitute an alternative administration. The vice-chancellors (VCs) often appear helpless in the face of pressure that the BCL can and does exert. Among the most notorious of impositions on general residents is the forced attendance to all BCL activities, even if it means missing classes and tutorials. Obviously, there is no scope for any dissent.

It must be mentioned here that during the years that the BNP was in power, Chhatra Dal (BNP's student wing) drove out every single supporter of the BCL from all the halls of Dhaka University, instituting a similar reign of terror.

An inevitable effect of the all-empowering sway of BCL politics in the public universities is the ever-dwindling power of the university administrations. The VCs, proctors, hall provosts, house tutors, and other administrative bodies are mostly appointed on political basis. Hence, they know the importance of keeping the BCL on their side, both to run the university and to hold on to their tenure. The cases of certain VCs – not all – being involved in corruption have greatly sullied the image and reputation of university administrations.

The politics of university teachers

"party above everything else" attitude of a section of the teachers. This has greatly contributed to the lowering of the prestige of teachers as the great "mentors" of learning (in our culture, the position of a teacher is very high and almost unquestioned). This also led to the rise in power of student wings of the respective political parties to which the teachers belong, as the latter need students' support in their own electioneering. Unfortunately, party politics has cut across university teachers, students and administration leading to the phenomenon of "politics above scholarship". This is what is destructive, not politics per se.

For those of us who are personal witnesses to the glorious days of our student politics and bask in the proud images of our teachers upholding the highest principles of truth, honesty and courage to protest against power, the present state of both the students and the teachers – thankfully there are some heart-warming exceptions – are sad indeed.

There was a time when student politics – especially the period that led to our Liberation War – gave the nation hope, confidence and joy. Today, it is a source of despair, sorrow and, very sadly, fear.

A Licence to Kill



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DEBRA EFROYMSON

Imagine being handed a gun and told that you could shoot someone and face no consequences. You would be horrified; almost all of us would refuse. The reason we aren't all murderers isn't simply the fear of prison; most of us could not stand the guilty horror of having someone's blood on our hands.

And yet, when we're in a car and pedestrians get in our way, we feel no compunction about threatening them, knowing that we could easily maim or kill them. This seems to apply even to generally kind, gentle people: something about being behind the wheel of an automobile turns us into homicidal maniacs.

Perhaps it's time to question how much the blame for aggressive, dangerous driving should be on the individual driver and how much on a car culture that suggests that it is the victim's fault if he or she is injured or killed in an "accident."

Consider the case of sexual harassment or rape. We question what the woman was wearing. Why she was out in the streets at night. Why she went to the assailant's home. The assailant must be held responsible for his actions, but a culture that inherently condones rape and harassment by blaming the victim rather than the perpetrator is also to blame.

In mid-February, three Bangladeshi students were killed in Toronto in a car going well over 100 mph. Never mind that the top speed allowed in most of Canada is 68 mph. In one tiny section of the United States, the speed limit is 85 mph; in the rest of the country, it is lower. And yet, sports cars are legally sold that can reach speeds of over 200 mph. Why is it possible to manufacture and advertise a car that goes faster than the maximum allowable speed? (Hint: it has something to do with

valuing corporate profits more than human life.)

This isn't to say that cars aren't deadly at slower speeds; that's why speed limits in residential areas tend to be quite low. But the glorification of speed certainly contributes to the inherent danger of motorised vehicles.

We put the blame on traffic police for not implementing speed limits. It would be far easier to enforce them if no cars were able to travel faster than the highest speeds allowed. Likewise, we blame people for littering while ignoring those who profit from the manufacture and promotion of unnecessary plastic packaging. We blame people for smoking or indulging in soft drinks, while companies rake in billions of dollars selling their heavily advertised products. Governments are supposed to provide healthcare and clean up the mess. People get sick and die, governments and individuals pay the costs, and corporations profit.

In Bangladesh, pedestrians are frequently the victims of speeding vehicles. Yet, we blame their "haphazard" movements (otherwise known as crossing the street, or walking in it because there is no usable footpath) as if they deserve the death penalty. As if one person's right to speed is inherently more valuable than others' right to life, especially some

poor slob who doesn't even use a car. When someone is killed, it's labelled a tragedy, a senseless accident. We blame the pedestrian or the lack of better road management and speed limit enforcement – despite the fact that America's roads, though in vastly better condition, are nearly as deadly as those in Bangladesh, and pedestrian road deaths are actually on the rise there.

Following every mass shooting in the US – or perhaps I should say every highly publicised one, as mass shootings are so common, most of them get little press – politicians on the right offer their thoughts and prayers while those on the left talk about the need for stronger gun laws. Most people outside the US shake their heads at the insanity of making weapons of war easily available for sale, and thus regularly paying the consequences in blood and gore. And yet, here we are with cars.

There are simple solutions, if we cared to implement them. Stop calling road crashes "accidents." Hold people legally responsible for the injuries and deaths caused by their vehicles travelling at high speeds. Stop allowing the sale of vehicles that go above the maximum speed limit. And most of all, with road crashes as elsewhere, please stop blaming the victims.