

Time to discard EVMs instead of repairing



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The recent image of a Jubo League leader carrying a ballot unit panel of an electronic voting machine (EVM) after snatching it during a by-poll in Chattogram's Boalkhali upazila is the latest addition to a growing list of examples as to why EVMs may not be suitable for conducting a free and fair election in Bangladesh. Neither the assistant presiding officer nor the on-duty members of the law enforcement agencies were able to prevent the mighty Jubo League's union level leader Nirmalendu Dey Sumon from taking the EVM ballot unit panel away. They were unable to recover it either; Awami League's union President Ratan Chowdhury recovered the panel and returned it to the polling centre.

This incident occurred only a few days after Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibur Awal said no one had yet made a sound and objective complaint about the use of EVMs, and the commission had taken a stand in favour of EVMs after conducting several tests. Would the CEC now, at the least, agree that his several tests didn't include robbing of ballot-equivalent parts of their very expensive toy? Clearly he has been oblivious to the arguments made by most of the political parties, except the ruling Awami League and its allies. There's even stronger opposition to the idea of using EVMs among the citizenry and civil

society organisations. Have the polling officers not blamed these machines' inefficiency for slowing down the voting process, which left many voters frustrated and contributed to lower turnout?

While speaking at a workshop in Cox's Bazar on March 11, the CEC, perhaps unwittingly, revealed the Election Commission's obsession with EVMs when he said, "The Election Commission is always in favour of conducting elections using EVMs. We are also working to find innovative modern technology for future elections." His comment that "so far, there has been no objective complaint about rigged elections using EVMs" suggests that he has conveniently forgotten that these EVMs do not have any option for verifying voting records, owing to a design fault of not including the voter-verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) system.

Even though it has abandoned the ambitious plan to hold 50 percent of the next parliamentary election through EVMs due to the country's ongoing financial crisis, the EC still appears to be aiming at using EVMs in quite a significant number of parliamentary seats. On March 15, the commission decided to ask the finance ministry for allocating Tk 1,260 crore (equivalent to more than \$1 billion) for repairing 110,000 EVMs. This means each EVM unit will cost Tk 115,000, which is nearly half



Amid the ongoing crisis, it would be sensible to abandon the wasteful plan of spending Tk 1,260 crore to repair broken EVMs.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

the purchase price.

It was reported in this daily that each EVM was bought for Tk 235,000, a price 11 times costlier than neighbouring India. When better EVMs (including VVPAT) cost much less, then why does the EC want to repair discredited junks?

Earlier, it was reported in the media that about 40,000 EVMs were beyond repair. When these EVMs were

introduced, the EC bought 150,000 EVMs, which means there's none, or very few, usable EVMs available now. Even then, the commission is insistent on having some EVMs in the upcoming parliamentary election.

According to Election Commissioner Anisur Rahman, the Election Commission just wants a pledge that its request would be approved. He told the media, "If we are assured of the required funds, we

will go for the work immediately. We can even make half payment to the Machine Tools Factory in this fiscal year and the rest in the next fiscal year." This shows the EC's resolve to go the extra mile to have as many EVMs being used in the next election as possible.

Such an extraordinary emphasis on having elections in some constituencies make us wonder whether there's more to this than

meets the eye. It may sound cynical, but questions can be raised whether the intention is to allow the workers of the ruling party to cover their unlawful act of pressing voting buttons for their candidates in the name of assisting the voters. Besides, allowing election officials up to one percent of the voters in a polling booth to cast votes through EVMs in the event of fingerprint mismatch also increases risks of manipulation.

The amount of money that the Election Commission is seeking to repair faulty EVMs is almost double the money allocated for the last parliamentary election – which was also a record in our electoral history. Available data shows that the allocation for the last national assembly election was Tk 700 crore, when the voter number was 104 million. The EC's original plan was to have voting in 150 constituencies through EVMs, and for that it sought Tk 8,711 crore, which would have cost us 14 times more than the previous election. In a way, the ongoing economic predicament has saved us from an exorbitant waste.

Under these circumstances, it would be sensible to abandon such a wasteful wish, and concentrate on other crucial preparatory work for the coming election instead. CEC Habibur Awal, in his public statements, has acknowledged that there is a crisis. The reason for the crisis is evident in his words, "We still do not see a consensus among parties regarding the upcoming general election, which is essential. We do not want any political crisis before or during the elections."

It's well understood that the CEC doesn't want to take the role of a mediator, but getting an agreement from the contending parties on the rules of the game beforehand is not someone else's responsibility.

In which direction is Bangladesh heading?



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As an activist, I interact with many people from all walks of life every day. They include young and old, women and men, ordinary villagers and urban elites. They also represent different shades of political opinions. However, one common trait among all of them is, they are preoccupied with our upcoming general election.

The common questions that I face in these interactions are: in which direction is Bangladesh as a nation heading? Will there be an election at the end of 2023 or the beginning of 2024? Will the election be free and fair? Will it be participatory? Will there be dialogues between the major political parties? Will there be a caretaker government? What will be the role of India, US, UK, Japan, and the EU? Will Khaleda Zia be able to participate in the election? Will Sheikh Rehana be in politics and contest the next election? Will there be further sanctions? Will there be violence during the election? And so on.

Through all these questions, these people invariably want to know the country's political destination via the coming election. Many of them feel that as a commentator on political issues, I know or should know the answers to these questions. Many of them are disappointed that I do not. Faced with such questions, I normally ask them about their own opinions and engage in conversations. Most of them do have opinions – rather strong opinions – about the future direction of the country. Many of them also do not hesitate to express them. Some even insist that their opinions are the correct ones, and I should wait to see their predicted future unfold.

Based on my conversations with hundreds of people over the past few weeks, I can see three possible scenarios unfolding in the coming months. The first and best scenario is of a free, fair and credible parliamentary election, which will be not only participatory, but also

competitive and credible. In the election, people will be able to cast their votes and our next government will be based on their consent. In other words, our democracy will be back on track through the next election.

Almost everyone I interacted with in the last few weeks are convinced that a free and fair election is a pipe dream. This is because the main stakeholders – the Election Commission, bureaucracy, judiciary, and the law enforcement agencies – are totally partisan, and they will make sure that the ruling party stays in power. Almost all of them have given up the hope for a free and fair election.

The second scenario is of a violent election. To some of the people I spoke with, violence is inevitable as people are angry not only because they could not vote in the past, but also because of the price hike of essentials as well as corruption. Many of them think that if violence goes out of control, everyone will be at risk. However, no one wants to see violence; they want peace and harmony. Some people feel that peace has become the new name of development – development will neither take place nor sustain with violence.

The third scenario is of another controversial election like the previous two. However, most of the people I interacted with feel that different types of strategies will be used to manipulate the upcoming election. Many of them

are convinced that the ruling party will come back to power one way or the other. They feel that the Election Commission and the ruling party's friends and cronies are ready to do the betting for them.


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Most people I interacted with in the last few weeks feel that there won't be serious violence, because the law enforcement agencies will be able to contain it. However, if the violence does escalate, many of the beneficiaries, in their view, will flee the country because they have already stashed away significant financial resources abroad. They also feel that with serious violence, the election will become uncertain.

Almost everyone I spoke with in the last few weeks are convinced that by whatever means, the ruling Awami League and its alliance partners are going to stay in power, the consequences of which, in their view, would lead us towards an uncertain future in the long run. In their opinion, free and fair elections are the only legal, constitutional, and peaceful means of going forward. If that is thwarted, it would lead to violence. Thus, manipulated elections will serve no purpose.

Some of the people, especially those who are sympathetic to the ruling party, are confident that the prime minister is a miracle maker who can use her magic wand to find a solution to our electoral problem. She has solved many thorny problems in the past. She has, for example, abolished the highly popular caretaker government system through the 15th amendment of our constitution and could manage its fallout. She can do it again.

We, too, hope that Sheikh Hasina's lucky streak will continue, and she will be able to pull a solution out of her hat for holding a free and fair parliamentary election for Bangladesh.



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তারিখ: ৯ চৈত্র ১৪২৯
২৩ মার্চ ২০২৩

“১৯৫৪ সালের নির্বাচনের পটভূমি ও বঙ্গবন্ধুর ভূমিকা” বিষয়ক গবেষণা সম্পাদনের জন্য গবেষণা প্রতিষ্ঠান/পরামর্শক প্রতিষ্ঠান নিয়োগের লক্ষ্যে আগ্রহব্যক্তকরণের অনুরোধ (REOI) সশর্ত বিজ্ঞপ্তি

(১) মন্ত্রণালয় / বিভাগ	: মুক্তিযুদ্ধ বিষয়ক মন্ত্রণালয়
(২) সংস্থা	: জাতীয় মুক্তিযোদ্ধা কাউন্সিল (জামুকা)
(৩) আগ্রহব্যক্তকরণ আবেদনকারী কর্তৃপক্ষের নাম ও ঠিকানা	: প্রকল্প পরিচালক, বঙ্গবন্ধুর আদর্শ ও মুক্তিযুদ্ধের চেতনা বাস্তবায়ন প্রকল্প, কক্ষ নং- ১৩০৭, জাতীয় স্কাউট ভবন (১৩ তম তলা), ৬০ কাকরাইল, ঢাকা-১০০০, ফোন: ০২২২৬৬৬৪৪৩৮, ইমেইল: nuriaminnahid@gmail.com।
(৪) ক্রয়/সংগ্রহ পদ্ধতি	: গুলগত মান ও বায়তনিক নির্বাচন পদ্ধতি (QCBS)
(৫) বাজেট এবং অর্থের উৎস	: উন্নয়ন খাত (সরকারি)
(৬) কাজের নাম	: “১৯৫৪ সালের নির্বাচনের পটভূমি ও বঙ্গবন্ধুর ভূমিকা” বিষয়ক গবেষণা সম্পাদন।
(৭) আগ্রহব্যক্তকরণ আবেদন গ্রহণের শেষ তারিখ ও সময়	: ১২/০৪/২০২৩ দুপুর ০২:০০ টা পর্যন্ত
(৮) গবেষণা কাজের সংক্ষিপ্ত বিবরণ	: ১৯৭১ সালের মহান মুক্তিযুদ্ধ ও তার মাধ্যমে আমাদের স্বাধীনতা অর্জন একদিনে সংঘটিত হয়নি। এটি বিভিন্ন কর্মসূচি ও আন্দোলনের মাধ্যমে ধাপে ধাপে এগিয়ে গিয়েছে এবং লক্ষ্যে পৌঁছেছে। আর এ সব কর্মসূচি ও আন্দোলনের সাথে বঙ্গবন্ধুর ভূমিকা ও তত্ত্বাবধানে জড়িত। ১৯৫৪ সালের সাধারণ নির্বাচনের পটভূমি, নির্বাচনে অংশগ্রহণকারী দলসমূহের নির্বাচনী ইশতিহার, প্রধান নির্বাচনী ইস্যু ও প্রচার কৌশল, নির্বাচন ও ফলাফল, অভিঘাত, এবং গুলুৎ ও প্রয়োজনীয়তা; নির্বাচনী ইশতিহার ও ফলাফলে পাকিস্তানের দুই অঙ্গলের অর্থনৈতিক বৈষম্যের প্রতিফলন; নির্বাচনে বঙ্গবন্ধুর ভূমিকা; এবং মহান মুক্তিযুদ্ধের পটভূমি তৈরিতে এই নির্বাচনের গুলুৎ ও তাৎপর্য তুলে ধরা এই গবেষণার অন্যতম উদ্দেশ্য।
(৯) গবেষণা প্রতিষ্ঠান/পরামর্শক প্রতিষ্ঠানের যোগ্যতা ও অভিজ্ঞতা	: (ক) প্রয়োজনীয় যোগ্যতা: (১) আগ্রহী গবেষণা/পরামর্শক প্রতিষ্ঠান বা গবেষণা দলের মুখ্য সদস্যদের মুক্তিযুদ্ধ/শান্তি ও যুদ্ধ/ইতিহাস বিষয়ে সফলভাবে কমপক্ষে তিনটি গবেষণাকর্ম সম্পাদনের অভিজ্ঞতা; (২) গবেষণা দলের দলনেতা ও উপনেতার মানবিক/কলা/মানবসম্পদ/ইতিহাস/সাহিত্য ও সম্পৃক্ত বিষয়ে ন্যূনতম পোস্ট গ্রাজুয়েশন ডিগ্রি এবং সাত বছরের গবেষণা করার অভিজ্ঞতা; (৩) গবেষণাদলের দলনেতা ও উপনেতার বাংলাদেশের প্রেক্ষিতে গবেষণাকর্ম পরিচালনা ও বাস্তবায়নের অভিজ্ঞতা; এবং (৪) গবেষণা দলের মুখ্য সদস্যদের বাংলা ও ইংরেজী ভাষায় মানসম্মত গবেষণা প্রতিবেদন লেখার অভিজ্ঞতা। (খ) অতিরিক্ত যোগ্যতা: (৫) গবেষণা দলের দলনেতা ও উপনেতার মানবিক/কলা/মানবসম্পদ/ইতিহাস/সাহিত্য ও সম্পৃক্ত বিষয়ে পিএইচডি ডিগ্রি; এবং (৬) আগ্রহী গবেষণা প্রতিষ্ঠান/পরামর্শক প্রতিষ্ঠান বা গবেষণা দলের মুখ্য সদস্যদের উন্নয়ন সহযোগী বা সরকারি অর্ধাধিকারিত গবেষণাকর্ম সম্পাদনের অভিজ্ঞতা।
(১০) গবেষণা কাজ শুরুর ও সমাপ্তির সম্ভাব্য তারিখ	: শুরুর: ১৬/০৬/২০২৩ খ্রি., শেষ: ১৭/১২/২০২৩ খ্রি.
(১১) অন্যান্য বিষয়াদি (প্রয়োজ্য ক্ষেত্রে)	: আগ্রহব্যক্তকরণ আবেদন একটি বন্ধ নামে নিম্নস্বাক্ষরকারীর বরাবরে দাখিল করতে হবে। নামের উপর স্পষ্টভাবে লিখতে হবে “১৯৫৪ সালের নির্বাচনের পটভূমি ও বঙ্গবন্ধুর ভূমিকা” বিষয়ক গবেষণা সম্পাদনের জন্য আগ্রহব্যক্তকরণ আবেদন”।

বি.দ্র.: কর্তৃপক্ষ কার্য দর্শনো ব্যতিরেকে যে কোন আগ্রহব্যক্তকরণ আবেদন বা সকল আবেদন গ্রহণ বা বাতিল করার ক্ষমতা সংরক্ষণ করেন।



ড. মোঃ নূরুল আমিন
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