

## EC's role in Gazipur laudable

It must also ensure fair campaign in the lead-up to elections

In what was perhaps a surprising twist to a dramatic unfolding of events centring the Gazipur city polls, independent candidate Zaida Khatun was elected city mayor on Thursday, defeating the Awami League candidate Azmat Ullah Khan. What made her win particularly remarkable – apart from the fact that she's the mother of suspended Gazipur mayor Zahangir Alam and had no political aspirations before her son was disqualified from running as an independent candidate – was the fact that her polling agents, as well as her supporters, were largely missing from the voting centres. Her campaign, too, was largely subdued. Azmat Ullah, on the other hand, enjoyed all the blessings of the ruling party. According to our reports, on election day, the presence of his supporters was overwhelming at most of the polling centres. And yet, Zaida defeated Azmat by 16,197 votes, in what was largely a peaceful election, as per our observation.

We commend the Election Commission for holding a violence-free and fair election in Gazipur City Corporation, in which people's verdict could be clearly heard. There is no denying that all eyes are now on the other city polls, and the EC has a critical role to play in convincing all concerned that it is able to carry out its constitutional obligation properly and independently.

The commission must also remember that an election is not a one-off event, and it has a duty to ensure that campaigns leading up to the elections are equally fair as well. The allegations of attacks on Zahangir and his mother must be investigated, as well as the allegations of electoral conduct violations by the supporters of the AL nominee. The EC must also take note of the low voter turnout, which has been a consistent red flag in the past polls as well, signifying people's lack of interest in the electoral process. It is incumbent upon the commission to make people believe that their vote still counts.

The results have also sent a clear message to the ruling party: it can no longer ignore people's sentiments. While the AL may have had good reasons to expel Zahangir from the party, it appears that people did not like the heavy-handed way in which he was targeted, particularly the threats on his life and that of his mother. Moving forward, the party must be more careful in choosing candidates whom people trust. More importantly, it must realise that the more aggressive it acts during the election campaigns, the more it risks alienating the voters. The ruling party must provide space to the opposition to carry out its programmes and campaigns, without threats and intimidation for its own sake.

## Pay more attention to thyroid disorders

Awareness campaign must focus on the disproportionate effect on women

Thyroid issues hide in plain sight and its persisting prevalence in the country warrants urgent attention of our healthcare system. Thyroid diseases affect around 50 million people in Bangladesh and is considered "as serious as diabetes," according to the Association of Clinical Endocrinologist and Diabetologist of Bangladesh (ACEEDB). Despite its prevalence, experts have revealed that most patients go undiagnosed. They have urged the government to introduce mandatory screening nationwide for every newborn and also stressed that testing before pregnancy is a must-do. We hope the authorities will acknowledge the importance of tackling the issue and implement an effective system for diagnosis.

We must note that measures should specifically take into account that thyroid problems, which arise from hormonal imbalances, disproportionately affect women, who are five to eight times more likely to have a thyroid problem than men. The symptoms – fatigue, depression, weight gain, etc – mirror daily life stressors and go ignored especially when voiced by women due to the entrenched stigma surrounding women's health. Patients also rarely seek medical attention as symptoms develop gradually and are quite non-specific. Therefore, more screening for thyroid diseases would seem appropriate, yet that is not the case.

The effect of thyroid disorders at different stages of women's lives are far-reaching. For younger women, the issues can cause puberty and menstruation to occur abnormally late or early. During reproductive stages, low levels of thyroid hormone can impair fertility and in future may result in the early onset of menopause. Women silently endure the paralysing impact of thyroid diseases bereft of a proper infrastructure mandating their diagnosis. Experts have previously said that thyroid hormone testing should be included in routine examinations offered to women. We implore officials to start devoting special attention to diagnosing women and treating thyroid disorders as a women's health issue too.

When introducing mandatory screening, the rural and urban divide in access to healthcare must also be addressed. Facilities in rural areas suffer from poor amenities and insufficient funding. Left undiagnosed, thyroid can significantly erode a person's quality of life. The authorities must ensure that screening tests for thyroid disorders are offered at primary healthcare facilities to equally treat and diagnose everyone suffering from this invisible illness.

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# The message from Gazipur city polls



THE STREET VIEW

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The just-finished Gazipur City Corporation election can be termed "fair." It was generally peaceful; there were no major incidents of violence. The ruling Awami League's mayoral candidate Azmat Ullah Khan lost to independent candidate Zaida Khatun (read: former mayor Zahangir Alam, since Zaida is his mother and has been placed as his proxy). This was a surprising turn of events, seeing as most news outlets reported not finding any of Zaida's polling agents at the majority of polling centres.

Before delving into the hows and whys of this result, and what this means in the long run, a little context is in order.

Major contenders of the Awami League began flexing their muscles as soon as the schedule for the five city corporation elections was announced, but the party decided to bet on its seasoned old horse, Azmat Ullah. Then Zahangir Alam emerged as an independent candidate. He collected nomination papers for his mother too, which, in hindsight, was a clever move. He might have anticipated obstacles to his own candidacy – which he did face. The Election Commission disqualified him saying that he was a loan defaulter. But his mother's nomination went through, and she became Azmat's main rival in an election that would otherwise have been an unexciting event.

From the outset, the polls were set up to be a three-way race. But with the BNP boycotting the election – not an altogether unpredictable move – it basically turned into a contest between an AL veteran and a former AL leader. Although Zahangir was expelled for life from the ruling party, his followers remained loyal to the individual, rather than the party.

As with any other elections, journalists went out to get a feel of the atmosphere. I spoke to rickshaw pullers, teachers, students, street vendors, and office goers. The more conversations with the common people I had, the more it became apparent that all was not well for the



Gazipur mayor-elect Zaida Khatun, flanked by her son Zahangir Alam.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Awami League on the ground. Slowly but surely, it became evident that the 61-year-old was going to give a tough fight to her more politically seasoned competitor.

On the surface, the situation remained calm up until and throughout the election day. Zaida's polling agents could hardly be found at the polling centres. The AL men had an overwhelming and vocal presence both inside and outside the polling centres. The voters were silent. They came and cast their votes peacefully. And when the result was announced, Zaida came out to be the victor – on the back of a silent revolution, becoming the second female mayor in Bangladesh.

This twist left everyone in an apparent quandary. How could Zaida, a homemaker with no affiliation with politics, possibly beat a powerful ruling

party veteran? When Zahangir did not get the nomination, Gazipur citizens seemed to think that the government had been unfair to him. The ballot was the only means of a fitting reply. So people voted for Zahangir's proxy. The attack on Zahangir's motorcade before the election did not go down well with the people either. Zahangir's uncompromising attitude and refusal

the central leadership did not likely realise. Ruling party leaders thought Azmat was a better candidate than Zahangir. In terms of politics, Azmat is certainly more seasoned, but Zahangir is seen more as the people's leader – a darling of the streets, so to speak. Besides, voters did not seem to appreciate the domineering style of Azmat's campaign, which was rife with

to let Azmat have a walkover seemed to have appealed to the people as well.

This government's main selling point for any election campaign is development. People know that if the Awami League loses the mayoral race, then the city is unlikely to see much development. Yet, the people of Gazipur voted against the ruling party candidate.

If we look at the voter turnout, it was 48.75 percent – more than half the electorate did not vote. Traditionally, in any local election, voter turnout is high. This is also an indication that people didn't have enough faith in the Election Commission or didn't feel encouraged to vote.

The most important message that the voters have sent out is that they are aggrieved. The anti-government sentiment is quite evident, which

the attitude that the mayoral race was all but won.

The result was not a shock for the local ruling party members, however. Awami League leaders in Gazipur confided that they were sceptical about people actually voting for the boat inside the booth no matter what they said outside. The results clearly point out that many apparent party sympathisers ended up voting for Zahangir.

Zahangir's charisma paid off and got his mother to the mayor's office. This should not be taken lightly. Bringing in a newbie as a proxy, fighting against a veteran who has the support of the ruling party, and actually winning the race is quite a gargantuan achievement. There could have been only one motivation for the voters. They wanted to beat the boat.

## FIXING THE LEARNING GAPS CAUSED BY COVID-19

# Is Bangladesh prepared for the fallout?



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Prof Tom Kane of Harvard University

and Prof Sean Reardon of Stanford University, teaming up with some other researchers from Dartmouth and Johns Hopkins, along with a testing company called Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), recently studied data from 7,800 communities in 41 out of the 50 US states, where almost 26 million elementary and middle school students are enrolled in more than 53,000 schools that constitutes approximately 80 percent of the public school students in the country. Doing so, they found that the average primary and secondary school students in the US overall fell half a year behind in maths, and third of a year behind in reading as a result of Covid-19 shutdowns. Yes, that was expected.

In a recent article published in *The New York Times*, titled "Parents Don't Understand How Far behind Their Kids Are in School," the authors provide insights that are valuable for the US, but what's important for us here in Bangladesh is that, when taken in the overall context of learning losses during the pandemic, the study is extremely relevant for us. Our own minimal and informal efforts at a similar study (with far less resources and limited scope) to work and collect data at a few schools in a village shows findings that are remarkably similar, and hence we believe it might be wise for us to take lessons from the findings

of this study.

In 2022, more than 90 percent of US parents thought their children had already or would soon recover from the learning losses. However, even with additional lessons, teachers and activities supported by the huge federal aid of \$190 billion, students caught up with only about 25 percent of the preceding 1.5 years' learning losses. It means, a minimum of four years will be required to fully catch up. A student from a lower-to-average-income family is typically 1.5 years behind the national average, and almost four years behind students from well-to-do families – in both maths and reading. To put this in perspective, given our meagre resources, let's consider how long it might take for students in Bangladesh to recover.

Our own work with 73 female students – a minuscule number in comparison – since mid-2022 shows almost the same results: an average fifth grader has only second grade to second-and-a-half grade abilities in reading, and much less in maths – approximately 2.5-3 years behind! Some pre-Covid studies here had suggested that students were typically behind almost two years in maths and 1.5 years in reading. Considering the massive toll in this regard, one could imagine how far behind the rest are – especially those who are in the provincial cities and in remote

villages. It's not impossible to imagine that some may not even have the second grade skills.

More than 30 million students in the primary and secondary schools in Bangladesh are in this situation today. The measures taken for recovery have so far been completely inadequate. The policymakers must be trying hard to tackle the issue, and we sympathise with the difficulties they are facing. However, the problem is so complex and massive that it might require summoning up every support and assistance that is available to the government – from the civil society to NGOs, and local philanthropic and social groups; anyone and everyone who is available.

Below are the specific issues identified in the study; let's try to relate them to our situation and explore the possible ways out:

1) Auto-promotions, testing on reduced curriculum, etc are a death sentence to education. In some disciplines, for example, in maths, the concepts need to be understood sequentially – as the article says, "from arithmetic to fractions to exponents to algebra." Making shortcuts in the curriculum, slashing certain topics, and most heinously, promoting students to the next grade – like what the Bangladesh government did – is tantamount to a death sentence to the educational career of many, if not most.

Unless a major effort is taken to provide extra hours of lessons to make up for the losses, especially in maths, these folks are not only never going to recover, they're increasingly going to fall behind. The result will be a massive nail in the coffin of our hopes for a "Smart Bangladesh." These folks will be unable to read, write or do basic arithmetic. The backbone of the working class – the strength on which

you build a nation – will have been destroyed.

2) Finding ways to add learning opportunities, especially with the aid of technology – e.g. Khan Academy, Zearn and other educational apps and platforms – can be helpful if properly used and expertly guided. But given the fact that our government may simply not have the resources available to support the whole public education system, it could, say, ask the Bangladeshis abroad to assist, local agencies to provide guidance, plead the parents for help, organise after-school groups – generally get all hands on board.

3) Make the teachers do their job. In the findings of the study mentioned here, and per our own personal experience, teachers are the biggest hurdle to learning, especially in Bangladesh, in primary and secondary schools. The majority of schoolteachers are neither sufficiently educated, nor trained, nor motivated to teach. Most of them are not willing to train themselves in any new educational tools. The government has to invest in good education; a meagre two percent of the nation's GDP is not going to create a "Smart Bangladesh."

Finally, it's true that we don't have America's problems, but we have our own. Fortunately or unfortunately, this particular problem has many similarities, and we can benefit from the knowledge already created. Failure to act on the learning losses of this generation – of the 30 million children – will cause the kind of havoc in the growth of our economy and the progress of our society the likes of which we have never seen. After all, this is nothing less than saving the future of this nation, and the government must take the issue more seriously.