The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Good idea, bad planning

RHD decision to scrap outdated vehicles must be implemented properly

We welcome the government decision to put over 74,000 outdated buses, trucks and other commercial vehicles under crushers. The decision was apparently revealed through a circular issued by the Road Transport and Highways Division (RHD) earlier this month. According to the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), there are at least 36,123 buses and minibuses that are past their 20-year economic life, while 38,123 trucks, lorries and tankers are past their 25-year life. Ensuring the roadworthiness of vehicles is vital to improve road safety and reduce pollution – both of which we need to work on desperately given the high number of accidents occurring every year and our record levels of air pollution caused, among other factors, by black smoke emanating from old vehicles.

Doing away with unfit vehicles is thus a step in the right direction. However, as typical of any government initiative in Bangladesh, this too risks becoming a victim of poor planning and lax enforcement. Reportedly, although the government set the economic lifespan of commercial vehicles, a guideline on scrapping them has yet to be finalised. Additionally, the gazette on economic lifespan hasn't been published either. The authorities say they would start dumping old vehicles once the gazette is published. But BRTA officials still don't know where to dump those, or for how long those should be kept in their custody.

The authorities will also have to hire contractors to scrap the outdated vehicles. According to the draft Motor Vehicle Scrapping Guideline-2023, the government will be outsourcing the job to enlisted private firms that will carry out the task under BRTA supervision. Officials, however, said the draft guideline and the RHD circular contained some discrepancies regarding the way private vendors would be hired. This only adds to the concerns given the government's poor history in hiring contractors. Also, there's no clarity on who will eventually foot the bills.

What all these inconsistencies and uncertainties show is that the decision, delayed as it is in a country long known for unsafe roads, has not been planned or coordinated properly. It can only mean further delays in execution, and further trouble when the scrapping begins. We urge the authorities to address these issues before getting started with the project, so that it doesn't get stuck halfway through or end up being a total waste of money and energy.

Why is corruption so widespread?

Govt must take action against the corrupt officials of BAAIGM

At a time when corruption has spread across almost all government institutions, it only makes sense that the Bangladesh Association for the Aged and Institute of Geriatric Medicine (BAAIGM) – formed to provide medical and social care to the elderly population – is not immune to it. However, the level of corruption witnessed at this institution is quite unthinkable. According to a *Prothom Alo* report, an investigation carried out recently has found instances of many financial and administrative irregularities that have pushed the institution almost on the verge of collapse.

From misappropriating money from funds for annual picnic or purchasing medical equipment to irregularities taking place in staff recruitment, corruption seems to have spread in every sphere of its operation. According to the investigation report, a committee in charge of arranging a picnic in January this year not only registered inflated bills for the arrangement, it also didn't follow due procedure in purchasing goods. For example, 664 grams of mutton were shown to be served in one meal for each of the participants who are above 60 years. Or think of the bills for 1,500 "Kashmiri shawls" apparently given to 904 people, which came at a cost of Tk 19,50,000. Recipients of the shawls have also alleged that those were actually locally made shawls, not Kashmiri ones. This is completely ludicrous.

Equally alarmingly, the authorities have used up nearly Tk 9 crore from its FDR to pay for salaries, allowances and other expenses, even though the money is supposed to be spent for the welfare of the elderly. Corruption was also found in the process of medical equipment purchase. Due to such irregularities, the residents of the BAAIGM old home and those needing medical care in its hospital are not getting the desired services.

All this demonstrates sheer neglect of a vulnerable community in need of care but, equally importantly, the sorry state of a vital public institution. We urge the government to hold BAAIGM officials accountable for corruption so that it can better serve their beneficiaries.

Time for AL to do some soul-searching

Partha Pratim Bhattacharjee
is planning editor at The Daily Star.

PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE

Whenever a crisis hits the ruling party, most of its leaders remain unfazed because they think, "Our leader is there; she will take care of it." But what happens when the party supremo doesn't get involved? Case in point: the Gazipur city polls.

Over the past decade, the ruling Awami League leaders have been busy bashing the BNP, holding programmes to counter the opposition parties and publicising the government's development activities, without spending much time to streamline the organisation itself. The party leaders were only concerned with delivering and circulating their own narratives, not listening to the people's voice.

Elections are a way for the party in power to gauge people's reactions on their policies and deeds. Have the voters been able or permitted to convey their responses to the government through the voting system that has developed over the decade? In the absence of opposition parties, especially the BNP, the ruling AL did not take the elections – local and national – as seriously as they should have. The party may have won those elections, but they failed to capture people's pulse.

Voters also did not have many options when casting their votes, as the candidates were either from the ruling party or its dissidents. This led the AL leaders to rest easy thinking that "whoever wins is one of ours."

Infighting within the party has grown over the years, leading to the Awami League becoming its own rival at the grassroots level. Its grassroots leaders' desperation to gain a position of power or cling to it widen the rift within the party every day.

Being elected unopposed, another ominous sign for democracy, has also become a regular phenomenon in the country in recent years. This has further fuelled the perception that anyone participating in an election on a ruling party ticket would win no matter what, which has led to widespread apathy among both the voters and prospective candidates from other parties, keeping them away from participating in the democratic process.

Take the seven-phase union parishad elections in 2021-2022 for example.

PHOTO: **AMRAN HOSSAIN**

A voter walks out of a polling centre in Gazipur during the city corporation election on May 25, 2023.

The unofficial results of 4,027 UPs in seven phases showed that the ruling party nominees for chairman won in 2,172 UPs, and independents won in 1,778. Party insiders said most of the winning independents were disgruntled AL leaders who contested after failing to get party nominations. Meanwhile, elections to the chairman posts in 369 UPs were not required as candidates were elected unopposed; of them, 368 were AL ticket holders.

This has been a common scenario in almost every election over the past decade or so. Some 153 candidates were elected unopposed in the 10th parliamentary election on January 5, 2014, when the BNP-led 18-party alliance boycotted the polls.

This disturbing trend of "elected unopposed" has led the ruling party men to get embroiled in a rat race of winning the "party ticket," instead of putting efforts into wooing the voters. Considered by many as the master of "vote politics," AL is now mostly dependent on law enforcers and bureaucrats to win over the battle with its candidates choosing to maintain close contact with the local administrations instead of the voters.

This practice, which has been an open secret, has recently forced the AL supremo to tell her party leaders that party tickets will not guarantee their win in the upcoming general polls, and they will have to win by dint of their popularity and merit. She categorically said that the election would be more challenging than the previous ones, and it would be participatory.

On May 7 last year, at a meeting of the Awami League Central Working Committee, the highest decision-making body of the party, the AL chief criticised some of her party leaders, saying those who are not confident about their win don't want the BNP to take part in the national polls.

This statement says many things.

The UP election was a wake-up call for the ruling party, but the AL didn't take enough measures to resolve its infighting. Initiatives by the ruling camp were only limited to threats of blocking nominations and party posts, some expulsions, and later granting amnesty to them.

The Gazipur city polls have, once again, exposed how badly the internal feud is impacting the AL, with the general elections only months away. The results in Gazipur stressed the need for some soul-searching within the party. But will the AL do it seriously?

The possibilities are slim, as a day after the election, a top party leader asked not to discuss the issue at the party president's Dhanmondi office.

However, party chief Sheikh Hasina, on Sunday, met with with Azmat Ullah at her Gono Bhaban residence, where she asked him the reason behind his defeat in Gazipur.

On Saturday, at a programme in the AL's Bangabandhu Avenue headquarters, General Secretary Obaidul Quader said democracy had won in Gazipur, and the Awami League did not interfere in the polls to make its candidate win. The ruling party second-in-command also said the people of the country were happier to see a free and fair election in Gazipur than they would have been seeing an AL candidate win.

The first part of his statement begs a pertinent question: does the Awami League interfere in the election process to make its candidates win? And lastly, he deserves kudos for his (belated) understanding of what makes people happy: a free and fair election.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

AI, democracy, and the global order

Manuel Muñiz *is provost of IE University and dean of the IE School of Politics, Economics and Global Affairs.*

Samir Saran *is president of the Observer Research Foundation.*

MANUEL MUÑIZ and **SAMIR SARAN**

Future historians may well mark the second half of March 2023 as the moment when the era of artificial intelligence truly began. In the space of just two weeks, the world witnessed the launch of GPT-4, Bard, Claude, Midjourney V5, Security Copilot, and many other AI tools that have surpassed almost everyone's expectations. These new AI models' apparent sophistication has beaten most experts' predictions by a decade.

For centuries, breakthrough innovations – from the invention of the printing press and the steam engine to the rise of air travel and the internet – have propelled economic development, expanded access to information, and vastly improved healthcare and other essential services. But such transformative developments have also had negative implications, and the rapid deployment of AI tools will be no different.

AI can perform tasks that individuals are loath to do. It can also deliver education and healthcare to millions of people who are neglected under the existing frameworks. And it can greatly enhance research and development, potentially ushering in a new golden age of innovation. But it can also supercharge the production and dissemination of fake news, displace human labour on a large scale, and create dangerous, disruptive tools that are potentially inimical to our very existence.

Specifically, many believe that the arrival of artificial general intelligence (AGI) – an AI that can teach itself to perform any cognitive task that humans can do – will pose an existential threat to humanity. A carelessly designed AGI (or one governed by unknown "black box" processes) could carry out its tasks in ways that compromise fundamental elements of our humanity. After that, what it means to be human could come to be mediated by AGI.

Clearly, AI and other emerging technologies call for better governance, especially at the global level. But diplomats and international policymakers have historically treated technology as a "sectoral" matter best left to energy, finance or defence ministries – a myopic perspective that is reminiscent of how, until recently, climate governance was viewed as the exclusive preserve of scientific and technical experts. Now, with climate debates commanding the centre stage, climate governance is seen as a superordinate domain that comprises many others, including foreign policy. Accordingly, today's governance architecture aims to reflect the global nature of the issue, with all its nuances and complexities.

As discussions at the G7's recent summit in Hiroshima suggest, technological governance will require a similar approach. After all, AI and other emerging technologies will dramatically change the sources, distribution, and projection of power around the world. They will allow for novel offensive and defensive capabilities, and create entirely new domains for collision, contest, and conflict – including in cyberspace and outer space. And they will determine what we consume, inevitably concentrating the returns from economic growth in some regions, industries, and firms, while depriving others of similar opportunities and capabilities.

Importantly, technologies such as AI will have a substantial impact on fundamental rights and freedoms, our relationships, the issues we care about, and even our most dearly held beliefs. With its feedback loops and reliance on our own data, AI models will exacerbate existing biases and strain many countries' already tenuous social contracts.

That means our response must include numerous international accords. For example, ideally we would forge new agreements (at the level of the United Nations) to limit the use of certain technologies on the battlefield. A treaty banning lethal autonomous weapons outright would be a good start; agreements to regulate cyberspace – especially offensive actions conducted by autonomous bots – will also be necessary.

New trade regulations are also imperative. Unfettered exports of certain technologies can give governments powerful tools to suppress dissent and radically augment their military capabilities. Moreover, we still need to do a much better job of ensuring a level playing field in the digital economy, including through appropriate taxation of such activities.

As G7 leaders already seem to recognise, with the stability of open societies possibly at stake, it is in democratic countries' interest to develop a common approach to AI regulation. Governments are now acquiring unprecedented abilities to manufacture consent and manipulate opinion. When combined with massive surveillance systems, the analytical power of advanced AI tools can create technological leviathans: all-knowing states and corporations with the power to shape citizen behaviour and repress it, if necessary, within and across borders. It is important not only to support Unesco's efforts to create a global framework for AI ethics, but also to push for a global Charter of Digital Rights.

The thematic focus of tech diplomacy implies the need for new strategies of engagement with emerging powers. For example, how Western economies approach their partnerships with the world's largest democracy, India, could make or break the success of such diplomacy. India's economy will probably be the world's third largest (after the United States and China) by 2028. Its growth has been extraordinary, much of it reflecting prowess in information technology and the digital economy. More to the point, India's views on emerging technologies matter immensely. How it regulates and supports advances in AI will determine how billions of people use it.

Engaging with India is a priority for both the US and the European Union, as evidenced by the recent US-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) and the EU-India Trade and Technology Council, which met in Brussels this month. But ensuring that these efforts succeed will require a reasonable accommodation of cultural and economic contexts and interests. Appreciating such nuances will help us achieve a prosperous and secure digital future. The alternative is an AI-generated free for all.