

Development must be people-centred

Tangail bridge left in ruins for five years requires urgent attention

The sorry state of affairs surrounding a bridge in Tangail serves as yet another reminder of the mismanagement and irregularities plaguing our development projects in general, and the negligence in ensuring quality control measures during construction in particular. According to a report, the 60-foot-long bridge, built five years ago, tilted under pressure from floodwaters just before its inauguration, and has been unusable ever since. This happened because of the use of sub-standard materials, poor workmanship and the lack of follow-through by both the contractor and the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, which had it built as part of a district-wide bridge development project during FY 2016-2017.

The question is, why hasn't it been reconstructed in all these years? Reportedly, after partially demolishing the structure, the contractor abandoned the work, citing the end of the project period. It also received only a fraction of the payment owed, indicating financial irregularities and potential corruption. Whatever happened to prolong the wait for a functional bridge, for the local communities, its consequences have been dire. The lack of a bridge has forced them to undertake longer journeys to reach crucial facilities such as the upazila health complex. Farmers in the area are unable to transport their agricultural produce efficiently, resulting in financial losses. Students are facing difficulties commuting to and from educational institutions, especially during the rainy season.

It was only a matter of logic that the project authorities would finish what they had set out to do, but they chose to ignore it in the absence of any institutional accountability. This is totally unacceptable. In the past, we also have had reports of such infrastructure development projects being stalled halfway due to flawed designs and other reasons. These cases exemplify a broader pattern of development policy characterised by poor planning and execution as well as lack of accountability. This has to change. A development policy cannot be solely focused on short-term gains or political expediency. It must strive for long-term sustainability, with the safety and welfare of citizens at the centre of its focus.

We, therefore, urge the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief to immediately undertake repairs to make the Tangail bridge operational. There is also an urgent need for a comprehensive system of checks and balances in all development projects to ensure that public money is utilised efficiently. Effective supervision is a must for the timely and successful completion of all projects.

Our workers in Maldives deserve better

RMMRU survey reveals cases of poor pay, abuse and discrimination

While the sufferings of Bangladeshi migrant workers abroad are nothing new, a recent study by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) has revealed a picture of hardship for those in the Maldives. Of the 120 current and 250 returnee migrants surveyed by RMMRU, 36 percent reported not being paid for overtime work. Documented workers earn an average monthly income of Tk 37,066 while undocumented ones earn Tk 25,650 – which might come as a surprise to those with a rosy vision of overseas earnings. On top of this, workers faced discrimination and abuse in multiple forms. For instance, around 38 percent of respondents said their employers had taken away their passports, while about half of both undocumented and documented workers faced workplace discrimination. Perhaps the most dehumanising treatment that they reported is physical or verbal abuse, which at least 18 percent of respondents suffered at one point.

Unfortunately, Maldives is not an exception – the plight of low-skilled Bangladeshi workers is quite similar in other destination countries, including Middle East, too. Wage theft, withholding of passports, discrimination, abuse of various kinds, and even threats of deaths are vulnerabilities that workers must contend with on a regular basis. Such injustices taking place in other countries may pose a challenge for us to address them. However, the onus is still on the government to ensure that our workers abroad are not abused or exploited. These people often have to pay a hefty sum to intermediaries (who make up an insidiously corrupt system) to get jobs there. Once there, they often work for inhumane hours for a relatively small amount, and then send whatever they can save back home. Through this uncompromising process, they give a boost to our economy.

It is, therefore, crucial that the government takes better care of our migrant workers, including those in the Maldives. It must ensure regular collaboration with the authorities of destination countries to ensure full compliance of labour rights, so that our workers can be protected from abuse and exploitation.

Free and fair elections for our sake

Not because the new US visa policy insists on it



THE THIRD VIEW

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Honestly, I find the latest visa policy of the United States for Bangladesh to be insulting. Free and fair elections are something we should ensure from our own sense of self-respect. Unfortunately, the truth is we have not done so on the past two occasions.

Now we have been bracketed with Nigeria – a perennially corrupt country whose elite have syphoned off billions for decades, neglecting their poor, which can be termed as “economic crimes against humanity” (a section of our elites have started doing so, too). The country is ethnically in shambles, with the terrorist group Boko Haram perpetrating the most heinous of crimes for years.

On the contrary, we nipped terrorism in the bud after the Holey Artisan tragedy. Our record in fighting poverty has opened many of our critics' eyes, and even US President Joe Biden has termed our economic progress exemplary.

So why is the US, through its visa policy, taking the steps that they are? If we had remained true to the values of our Liberation War – of strengthening democracy, upholding the rights of all, and ensuring good governance – we would not have to

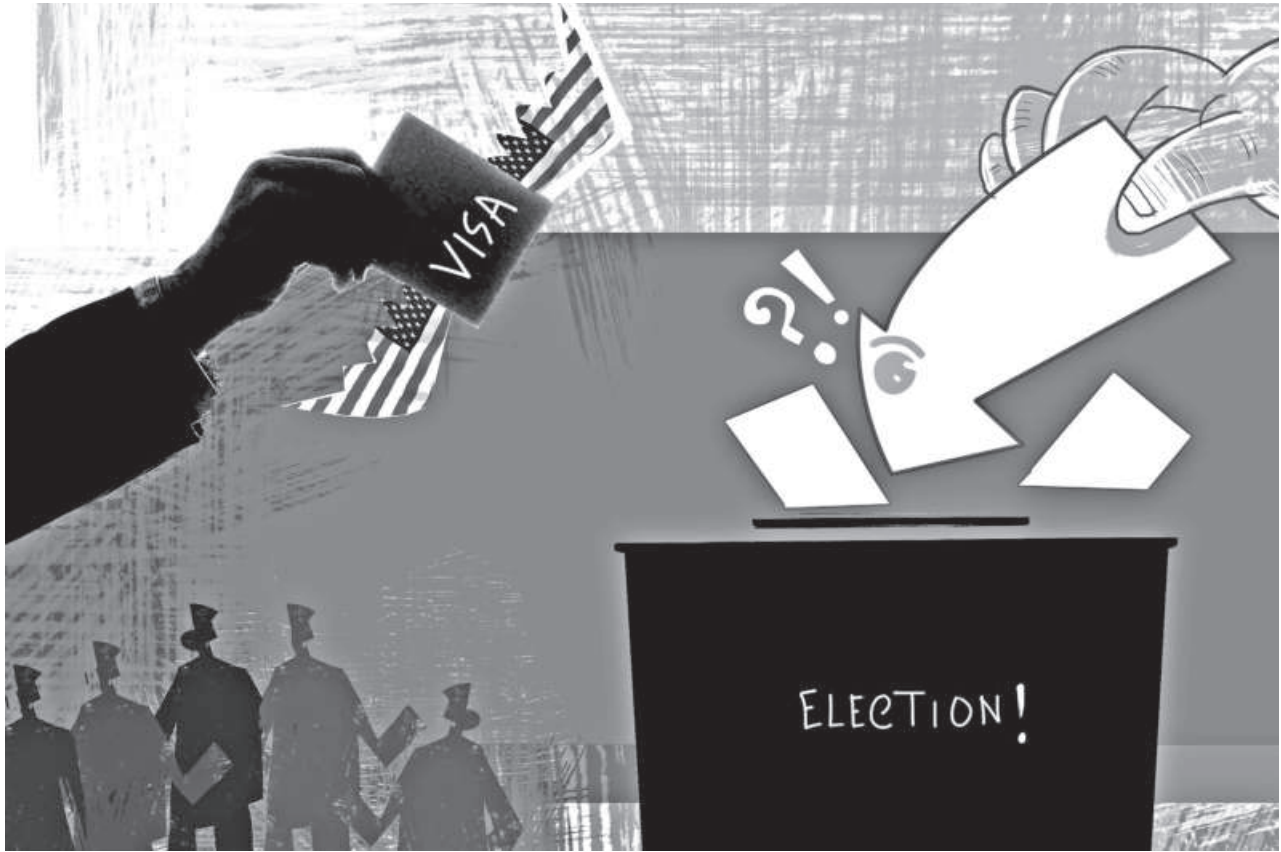


ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

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The truth is, we have made a shambles of our elections and have weakened most of the accountability structures like the parliament, statutory bodies, legal infrastructure, etc. To ensure loyalty, we have filled vital institutions with political sycophants, and a section of the administration with careerists to whom competence is never a factor and integrity is only a feature of the fools. We have practically handed over the business world to loan defaulters, money launderers, and opportunists. Only deliberate and criminal neglect could have permitted a select few to loot our banks as they have. There are some honourable exceptions, and it is they who have held up our economy.

We made a mockery of democracy by concentrating all powers in the hands of the government, the ruling party and their supporters. Did we not play havoc with our electoral system through 153 “uncontested” MPs in 2014, and with the ballot box stuffing the night before polling in 2018? Just as I write, a law is being proposed to

curtail the powers of the Election Commission. This is all happening while we promise our people and the world that we are committed to free and fair polls. Today, if the international community, at the moment led by the US, casts serious doubt about our election process, can we really blame them? Can we deny that a widespread belief exists among the general public that, without pressure, the upcoming election will be a repeat of what we saw in the last two instances?

Only last year, we celebrated 50 years of Bangladesh-US diplomatic relations with President Biden writing a letter to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, stating, “I am confident our partnership will continue to flourish for the next 50 years and beyond,” adding that the drive, resourcefulness, and innovations of Bangladeshis – rebuilding after the 1971 war and now forging a path of economic growth and development – serve as a model for the rest of the world.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken commended Bangladesh on the occasion for “showing extraordinary humanity” by sheltering one million Rohingya. He also praised Bangladesh for being one of the strongest supporters of UN peacekeeping role, for promoting climate change issues and effectively fighting the pandemic in which the US donated 61 million vaccine doses and \$131 million in assistance. The US remains our biggest destination for RMG exports.

What happened that within a year our bilateral relations came to such a pass that our prime minister did not shy away from stating in an interview with BBC in London on May 16, when asked why the US had imposed sanctions, “I don't know, maybe they don't want me to continue – or the progress we are making in Bangladesh, they cannot accept it. This is my feeling.”

been going on unabated, in spite of protests by the public and vehement criticism in the independent media.

Disappearances were turned into a mockery with ministers making ridiculous public statements, like those who disappeared had actually “run away” from home or were among those “drowned in the Mediterranean Sea” while trying to illegally go to Europe. No attention was paid to the claim of the families that law enforcement officials in plain clothes were seen on the scene.

The US imposed sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and some of its serving and former officials, and like magic, such killings almost totally stopped. Instead of taking credit for this effective remedial action, the authorities went on denying any wrongdoing and praising the sanctioned officials and promoting them as models of law enforcement.

The exclusion of Bangladesh from the Democracy Summit hosted by Washington in 2021, in which 110 countries including Pakistan were invited, was a clear indication that something was deeply wrong in our understanding of each other. Inexplicably, when the exclusion was repeated in the second biannual gathering in 2023, we carried on as usual.

The latest blow was a letter written by six US congressmen to President Biden urging him to take “urgent action to stop human rights abuses by the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina... and to give the people of Bangladesh the best possible chance for free and fair parliamentary elections to be scheduled this fall.” One action that was suggested was extremely disconcerting.

The letter contains serious allegations of abuse, torture, extrajudicial killings, jailing of journalists, disappearance of opponents, and assault or killing of

peaceful demonstrators, etc., many of which are grounded on facts.

But many are not. The allegations that “Since Sheikh Hasina's rise to power, the Hindu population has been halved. Looting and burning of households, destruction of temples and religious idols, murder, rape, and forced religious conversions are causing Hindus to flee Bangladesh.

Sheikh Hasina's government has also persecuted Bangladesh's minority Christian population – burning and looting places of worship, jailing pastors, and breaking up families when religious conversions occur” are simply not true. In no way can the government be accused of committing these “crimes.” We urge the authors of the letters to acknowledge the factual errors and correct them.

However, the main question raised by the US visa policy remains on hand – making the upcoming general election free and fair, which is the universal demand of our people.

Regardless of what the world may or may not say, it is our own sacred duty to hold free and fair elections. This we must do for our own sake, for our people, and for our future. Let us admit that we made a farce of the process earlier, and our people will not accept a repeat of the past. We must do everything to correct our past mistakes. Let us also understand that we live in a globalised world where interdependencies rule, and finer economic calibrations must make space for other considerations.

We must also internalise the meaning of our own slogan “Digital Bangladesh.” As we digitise, the world does too, and often much faster. This means that what we do is known to the world instantly. Just as a slight tremor in some remote corner of the world is known within a second, the slightest vote-rigging in some remote part of Bangladesh, too, becomes global knowledge in no time. Yes, we can shut down social and other media, but information will flow regardless, and all our claims will be tested against facts and our credibility will stand or fall against what that comparison brings out.

So we cannot hide, and we only fool ourselves by thinking that we can. We must truly and sincerely go for free and fair elections. Our future depends on it. We still have time to do so.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Send us your letters to letters@thedailystar.net

District-level hospitals must have ICUs

Those of us who live outside the divisional cities of the country often do not get the much-needed healthcare services. This is especially because most district-level hospitals do not have Intensive Care Units (ICU). While some of them have ICUs, those are not operational due to a lack of technical support.

For instance, in the Sirajganj General Hospital in our district, there is a four-bed

ICU unit. But it is not being utilised. And I would like to know why.

Often, there are reports of critically ill patients dying in ambulances while on their way to Dhaka or other divisional centres. What is the point of having this unit if patients are deprived of the service? In the absence of operational ICUs in these hospitals, patients are forced to go to divisional hospitals or rush to the capital for emergency medical

support. We would like to see a change of this situation. We would also be grateful if the health care authorities took an initiative to establish ICUs in all district-level hospitals. It is an essential and life-saving feature which should not be so glaringly absent in smaller healthcare facilities.

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