



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

## Barishal, Khulna city polls exposed what's wrong with our elections



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The elections to Barishal and Khulna city corporations held on May 12, 2023 cannot be considered free, fair and credible, as they were non-competitive. The main opposition BNP did not take part in them because of their experience with "managed elections" of the past, which I termed the "Khulna model" (*The Daily Star*, July 17, 2018).

In 2018, during the "Khulna model" city polls, ruling party supporters, partisan bureaucrats and certain members of law enforcement agencies, in connivance with the Election Commission, helped deliver the election results in favour of ruling party candidates. The law enforcement agencies' partisan role was so blatant that the late Election Commissioner Mahub Talukdar in his book *Nirbachonnama* observed, "Based on the overall considerations, I came to realise that the election's control was transferred from the Election Commission to the law enforcement agencies. The 'Khulna model' was in operation in five city corporations: Khulna, Gazipur, Barishal, Sylhet, and Rajshahi." In BNP's absence and with only minor political parties participating, these so-called contests can hardly be called "elections" as an election truly means choosing among alternatives – credible alternatives.

This year, the city polls were relatively peaceful in Khulna – again, mostly because of the absence of BNP candidates, and the new US visa policy may also have been a deterrent. But it was not so peaceful in Barishal. The attack on Islami Andolan Bangladesh (IAB) candidate Syed Faizul Karim, however, appears to be a mere spur-of-the-moment act by some ruling party zealots who viewed him as the stronger opponent and a potential threat to their candidate's victory. What

this attack truly reflected, though, was hatred and intolerance, which are the trademark of toxic politics in Bangladesh. Fortunately, the violence did not escalate despite a demonstration staged by the IAB supporters with sticks in protest of the attack – perhaps because the ruling party high-ups restrained themselves due to the threat of American visa restrictions.

Although the attack caused minor injuries to the IAB candidate, the real "victim" of the incident appears to be the chief election commissioner (CEC) himself because of his unguarded remark, "Did he [Karim] die?" As a consequence of what happened in Barishal, the IAB has announced that it will not participate in the elections to Sylhet and Rajshahi city corporations, further denting the credibility of these one-sided, so-called elections. There has been speculation that the IAB had a behind-the-scenes negotiation with Awami League, as a result of which they have been contesting all the elections. The Barishal incident may have damaged that relationship, to the detriment of the Awami League interest in making all elections participatory.

Other than the violence in Barishal, the city elections in Khulna and Barishal were largely uneventful. Can the Election Commission take credit for holding "successful" elections in these two cities, though? My answer to the question is an emphatic "no," because in the absence of BNP in the game, these were not real tests for the commission. As we saw in 2018, the behaviour of the ruling party supporters, the bureaucrats, and the law enforcement agencies would have been different if AL's arch rival BNP was in the contest.

The voter turnout was 42-45

percent in the Khulna city polls and over 50 percent in Barishal, which were higher than expected – especially in the case of Khulna. Some political parties attribute this relatively high turnout to the manipulation by using electronic voting machines (EVMs) – results of voting via EVMs cannot be verified by recounting since our EVMs do not have the VVPAT (voter verifiable paper audit trail). However, voter turnout is normally high in the city corporation elections because ward councillor candidates draw voters to the polling centres. BNP's absence as well as the absence of the fear of violence may have encouraged neutral voters to go to the polling centres.

Interestingly, Talukder Abdul Khaleque, the AL-backed candidate in Khulna who won the mayoral race, received about 20,000 fewer votes in 2023 than in 2018. Likewise, Barishal mayor-elect Abul Khair Abdullah, also an AL candidate, received about 20,000 fewer votes than his predecessor Serniabat Sadiq Abdullah in 2018. What does this mean? They may reflect the ruling party's overconfidence that their candidates will win the elections anyway. It may also mean that because of the price hikes, power crisis, corruption and other anomalies, the soft supporters or neutral voters who voted for the Awami League in 2018 decided against doing so this time.

Given the experience of the city elections so far, the Sylhet and Rajshahi city polls will surely be peaceful, and the boat will easily sail through. But the same is unlikely to happen in the upcoming general election, which is a different ball game. Since power changes hands through the general election, major political parties will make all-out efforts to win – maybe even by resorting to violence. However, the weaponisation of the constitution by making the holding of elections under the party in power a requirement, through the 15th amendment, still stands as the biggest threat to a credible national election.

## Bangladesh cannot become smart with a gaping digital divide



A CLOSER LOOK  
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TASNEEM TAYEB

Despite the Smart Bangladesh Vision 2041 turning into a central theme of the nation's futuristic progress narrative, the digital divide remains a major issue.

According to Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics (BSVS) data, despite the increase in the number of internet users, only 37.1 percent of the rural population uses the internet, while the figure stands at 53.7 percent for the urban population. Similarly, while 47.6 percent men use the internet, for women the figure stands at only 34.6 percent. Even among women internet users in rural and urban areas, the digital divide is gaping at 30.5 percent and 47.9 percent, respectively.

While the government has taken many initiatives to realise the Smart Bangladesh vision, a significant chunk of the population remains beyond the digital umbrella, especially in rural areas where digital connectivity is hard to find. This is despite the Digital Bangladesh 2021 vision being driven since 2008. I have worked in many remote villages of Kushtia and Rangpur on youth skill development and women empowerment projects over the last few years, where WiFi or broadband internet were not only unheard of, but mobile internet was also difficult to find.

While the city centres and upazilas are somewhat covered by pricey mobile internet packages or broadband connections – despite the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC)'s "One Country, One Rate" initiative launched in June 2021 that set the standard tariff for a 5 Mbps connection at Tk 500, many service providers are still charging users a higher price – there are many villages in the fringes where the youth (especially girls) face difficulty in accessing the internet for academic purposes.

While experts have blamed lack of infrastructure and technological resources for the low penetration of internet in rural areas, there are two major factors that need to be taken into consideration: socio-economic ability and literacy level.

The cost of internet in Bangladesh is high. A report by VPN provider Surfshark revealed that people in Bangladesh pay 6.9 times more for internet access than the rest of the world.

Logically speaking, at current prices, and amidst the burden of unbridled inflation and economic volatility, one cannot expect the underserved rural population to be able to afford internet services,

especially since it is not a need for them.

Secondly, access to digital literacy among the youth is very limited in rural areas, especially in remote villages. While some of these youths have access to smartphones and mobile internet, they use it mostly for entertainment and friendly communication. As such, the ability of these youths to use digital devices and the internet to generate income – through e-commerce, outsourcing, etc – remains severely stunted.

Then there is the problem of

and the digitisation process remains full of discrepancies to this day. For instance, toll booths are still operated manually, resulting in long queues during holidays, despite the commitment in 2008 to automate 50 percent of the toll collection booths countrywide. And while corrections on national ID (NID) cards can be requested online, the process is not fully digitalised, with individuals being required to go to the office to update their addresses, for example. While people with NID cards should not have to give their fingerprints again, they are still required to when trying to get a driving licence.

It is high time the government took a closer look at the deeper, more strategic implementation layers of its Digital Bangladesh vision to see where it had gone wrong in fully materialising it and take lessons from these past experiences and mistakes to effectively implement the new Smart Bangladesh vision.



While corrections on NID cards can be requested online, the process is not fully digitalised. REPRESENTATIONAL PHOTO: STAR

mobile internet speed. Ookla's Speedtest Global Index of 2022 ranks Bangladesh at 121 out of 141 countries, with its maiden download speed of 14.34 Mbps. Among South Asian countries, Maldives stood 25th globally, and India ranked at 79 with a maiden download speed of 25.29 Mbps.

Not that Bangladeshis cannot manage the basics at its existing internet speed – making calls, sending text messages, viewing content. But for those working in outsourcing, especially in jobs involving graphic design and VFX, data transfer can be a painful challenge.

At a glance, it looks like the government is operating at a beginner level in materialising its digital vision, with a significant population outside the digital coverage unaware of these initiatives or unable to avail the services. For instance, although the government has made many of its services digital – or is "computerised" more accurately – their utility remains limited, especially outside the cities.

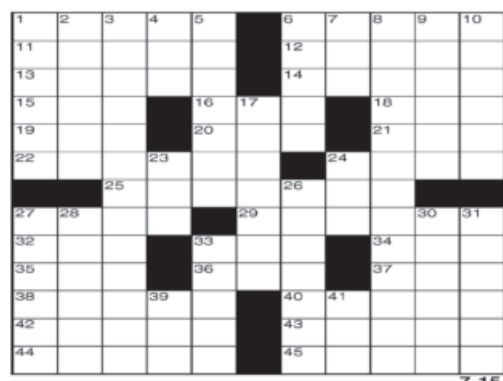
Moreover, many of the important services are yet to be digitalised,

The government should also look at its global scores in various rankings – including the UN's E-Government Development Index (EGDI) which assesses three dimensions of e-government: provision of online services, telecommunication connectivity, and human capacity – to identify blind spots and room for improvement, so that these can be navigated better while implementing the Smart Bangladesh vision.

In essence, this vision is about being inclusive; about empowering citizens with Smart Governance, Smart Economy, and Smart Society. It is about bridging the digital divide. But for all this to happen, the government needs to work on the basics, such as chalking out a reasonable, time-bound, goal-oriented strategy, formulating relevant policies, onboarding partners and service providers, forging effective collaborations, identifying logistics and resources and channelling them without pilferage, and taking all these one step at a time.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**  
1 Country division  
6 Bank meetings  
subtraction  
11 Two-dot character  
12 Kagan of the Supreme Court  
13 Modify  
14 Loses freshness  
15 Research site  
16 Misery  
18 Ran into  
19 LAX guess  
20 Wall climber  
21 Galena, for one  
22 Downfall  
24 Travel stops  
25 Draw in
- 27 Reduced amount  
29 Secret meetings  
32 Fire leftover  
33 Target  
34 Woolen cap  
35 Hotel amenity  
36 Bond, for one  
37 Copying  
38 Benefits  
40 Creative sort  
42 Like argon  
43 Happening  
44 Moves slowly  
45 High homes
- DOWN**  
1 Climbed  
2 So far  
3 "Hold On" band  
4 Summit
- 5 Interweave  
6 Loser to Truman  
7 Inventor  
Whitney  
8 Triple Crown leg  
9 Hospital worker  
10 Samples  
17 Add too much to the bill  
23 "– been real!"  
24 Far from cordial  
26 Green plastic toys  
27 Dog star  
28 Site of Sevilla  
30 Natural gift  
31 Know-how  
33 Helpers: Abbr.



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

R A B B I E Q U A L  
T E X T S M U S T I  
U N D E R T H E G U T T E R  
K N E E F I N A B A R  
E A R F E W U S E  
D E N I M N O T E S  
A L I V E D U E T O  
M I X E S S P R A Y

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh  
Local Government Engineering Department  
Office of the Executive Engineer  
Pirojpur  
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Memo No.46.02.7900.000.07.001.2023- 3825 Date-19.06.2023

**e-Tender Notice No-51/2022-2023 (OTM)**

e-Tender is invited in the national e-GP system portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of works office of the under signed.

Sl. no.	Tender ID No.	Package No and Name of works	Last selling date & time	Closing & Opening Date & Time
1	837802	(BDIRWSP/PIR/BAN/DW-62) Widening & Strengthening of Bhandaria- Kawkhali RHD (Mohasin Chorasta) via Sordarer hat & Enayet Khan hat road at Ch. 0.00-2000m including 03 Nos. 2.00mx2.00m RCC Box Culvert at 500m, 750m & 1500m under Bhandaria Upazila, District-Pirojpur. Road ID No: 579144040. Salvage Materials Cost Tk. 402304.00	12.07.2023 16:00 PM	13.07.2023 13:00 PM
2	837803	(BDIRWSP/PIR/BAN/DW-63) Widening & Strengthening of Bhandaria- Kawkhali RHD (Mohasin Chorasta) via Sordarer hat & Enayet Khan hat road at Ch. 4000-6200m including 03 Nos. 2.00mx2.00m RCC Box Culvert at 4250m, 5500m & 5700m under Bhandaria Upazila, District-Pirojpur. Road ID No: 579144040. Salvage Materials Cost Tk. 432320.00	12.07.2023 16:00 PM	13.07.2023 13:00 PM
3	837804	(BDIRWSP/PIR/BAN/DW-64) Widening & Strengthening of Nadmulla UP - Nadmulla Madrasha Hat via Chinguria and Coloni Bazar road at Ch. 0.00-2000m including 02 Nos. 2.00mx2.00m RCC Box Culvert at 1400m & 1750m under Bhandaria Upazila, District-Pirojpur. Road ID No: 579143010. Salvage Materials Cost Tk. 381024.00	12.07.2023 16:00 PM	13.07.2023 13:00 PM
4	837805	(BDIRWSP/PIR/BAN/DW-65) Widening & Strengthening of Bhandaria-Gazipur-Banai-Bhagirathpur bazaar (Mathbaria) road at Ch. 2900-5000m including 02 Nos. 2.00mx2.00m RCC Box Culvert at 4500m & 4900m under Bhandaria Upazila, District-Pirojpur. Road ID No: 579142006. Salvage Materials Cost Tk. 379904.00	12.07.2023 16:00 PM	13.07.2023 13:00 PM
5	837806	(BDIRWSP/PIR/BAN/DW-66) Widening & Strengthening of Nadmulla UP - Nadmulla Madrasha Hat via Chinguria and Coloni Bazar road at Ch. 2000-4000m including 02 Nos. 2.00mx2.00m RCC Box Culvert at 3300m & 3800m under Bhandaria Upazila, District-Pirojpur. Road ID No: 579143010. Salvage Materials Cost Tk. 353024.00	12.07.2023 16:00 PM	13.07.2023 13:00 PM

This is an online Tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the national e-GP portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted. To submit e-Tender, registration in the national e-GP system portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required. The fees for downloading the e-Tender documents from the national e-GP system portal have to be deposited through on line at any branches of registered Banks branches. Further information and guidelines are available in the national e-GP system portal and from e-GP help desk ([helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd](mailto:helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd)).

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