

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## E-centres in shambles

### Is this what Digital Bangladesh should look like?

We are thoroughly disappointed by the fate of an ambitious government project, undertaken more than a decade ago, to convert 8,500 post offices in rural areas to e-centres for the communities. A whopping Tk 541 crore was spent under the Post e-Centre for Rural Community project to deliver services including e-governance, e-commerce, e-education, e-agriculture, faster disbursement of remittances and allowances to rural communities. But a recent report by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), based on field visits to 900 of the centres, concluded that the funds had essentially been "wasted." The rural communities are completely unaware of the digital services that are supposed to be offered, as a result of which most of the spaces are severely underutilised.

Although about Tk 380.68 crore was spent on purchasing expensive equipment such as computers, scanners, headphones, printers, finger vein machines and so on, 20 percent of the centres were never even inaugurated, while the equipment in the rest are also falling apart as a result of lack of use. Another Tk 7.81 crore was wasted by purchasing devices not required. Meanwhile, about Tk 18.83 crore was spent to purchase furniture, of which 70 percent was lost over the years. Those who are supposed to manage the e-centres and provide support to users were found to be occupied in other professions.

Given the current status of the centres, it seems safe to surmise that spending the funds was the sole purpose and priority of those planning and implementing the project. Clearly, no effort was made to involve the communities in the centres afterwards and to capacitate them to use the technology to better their lives. Those tasked with running the centres did not even bother to ensure their minimum maintenance. This is indeed shameful, particularly for a government that has always prided itself for its role in creating a Digital Bangladesh. Is this what lies behind the grand gesticulations of digitisation – deserted spaces with dilapidated gadgets that no one knows how to use?

Mustafa Jabbar, who has been serving as the posts and telecommunication minister since 2018, admitted that there was inadequate planning when the project was undertaken. But why has nothing been done to make these centres operational and useful in the past four years? As for the colossal waste of taxpayers' money to fund this project, who will answer for it? We welcome the CAG's audit, which has laid bare the appalling condition of the e-centres, and urge the relevant ministry to take urgent steps to salvage whatever still remains of the initial investment and start delivering at least some of the digital services promised.

## Provide urgent support to the flood-affected

### Make sure their financial and medical needs are properly met

The flood situation in the north and northeastern districts of the country continues to be of significant concern. Heavy rainfall in the first few days of July and onrush of water from upstream caused sudden flooding in the country's northeast and, eventually, in northern districts. As of writing this editorial, several northern and northeastern districts continue to be inundated with rivers continuing to swell. According to the Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (FFWC), the water level of Jamuna and Padma rivers will continue to rise till Friday.

The water of the Teesta crossed the danger level early Wednesday, inundating villages in low-lying areas of Lalmonirhat. This has also resulted in the swelling of the Dharla. The combined effects of this, along with rising water levels of other rivers, mean that the situation in certain regions of Kurigram and Bogura needs to be followed closely.

For now the good news is that except for the Khowai, the Someswari and the Dhalai rivers, water levels of major rivers in the northeastern region of the country are falling, and the trend may continue for 48 hours. This might provide the inhabitants of the region with some respite from flooding soon.

However, the fact remains that much of the damage from flooding has already been done. In places like Sunamganj, several thousand people have been badly affected by the flooding. In Netrakona, vast areas of Kalmakanda upazila have been inundated. And several other regions have experienced similar situations. Farmers of some north and northeastern districts have incurred substantial crop losses. So, the government needs to urgently provide support to the farmers, as well as the general people of these regions.

The outbreak of waterborne diseases is always a risk after floods. Therefore, besides providing people with financial and rehabilitative assistance, the government, working with NGOs and others, needs to ensure that everyone across the affected regions have immediate access to adequate medicines and medical support.

As we navigate the age of climate change, it is important to take note of the fact that extreme flooding events have become the norm. Instead of rushing to provide support and relief after disaster strikes, Bangladesh must prioritise adaptation with a focus on climate resilient infrastructure both in practice and at a policy level.

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# Politics at crossroads

## The prospect of a free and fair election is still eluding us



THE THIRD VIEW  
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Most national elections, wherever they are held, occupy that country's attention for a maximum of a few months – in some cases, even a few weeks. But for us, it is a multi-year obsession. We started talking about our national election from last year. Now it occupies the centre stage of talks even with some of our most important international partners, namely the United States and European Union; the latter's pre-election assessment mission is already in town, whose findings will significantly impact Western views on the upcoming polls.

With so much attention, one would think that our election must be among the best in the world. Sadly, it is among the most questioned. Even Erdogan's election, who ruled Turkey as prime minister and president with an iron hand for over 20 years, was not subjected to such scrutiny as ours is and will be. Even the run-off went smoothly with razor-thin margins the first time around. The opposition never accused the all-powerful president of rigging. The reason is simple: everybody – be it the ruling or the opposition party – trusts the process. Our case is the exact opposite.

Even though there are endless talks about the election, there is hardly ever any sensible discussion on it. What we have is regular public utterances of the major political parties, which are mostly acrimonious, defamatory and setting precedents, but never aimed at narrowing the distance among them. Even after 52 years of independence and 32 years of restoration of democracy – and after all the talks, experiments, debates, international negotiations (there was also an attempt by former US President Jimmy Carter some years back), efforts by the Commonwealth and UN – we still don't have an agreed formula on how to hold a free and fair election.

At the moment, a section of the international community, led by the US, is pressing us to hold a free and fair election. The ruling party interprets this simple and natural demand as a hidden attempt to remove them from power. The opposition hopes that it is a formula that will place them in power. Nobody wants to know, or even asks, what the citizens want.

As taxpayers and law-abiding citizens, we want our freedoms, rights, and good governance. They can only be realised if democracy exists. Democracy, simplistically put, can only flourish if genuine representatives of the people are elected, and that can only happen if elections are free, fair and without violence and money play. We come full circle and end with the focus on free and fair elections.

Journalistically put, our development

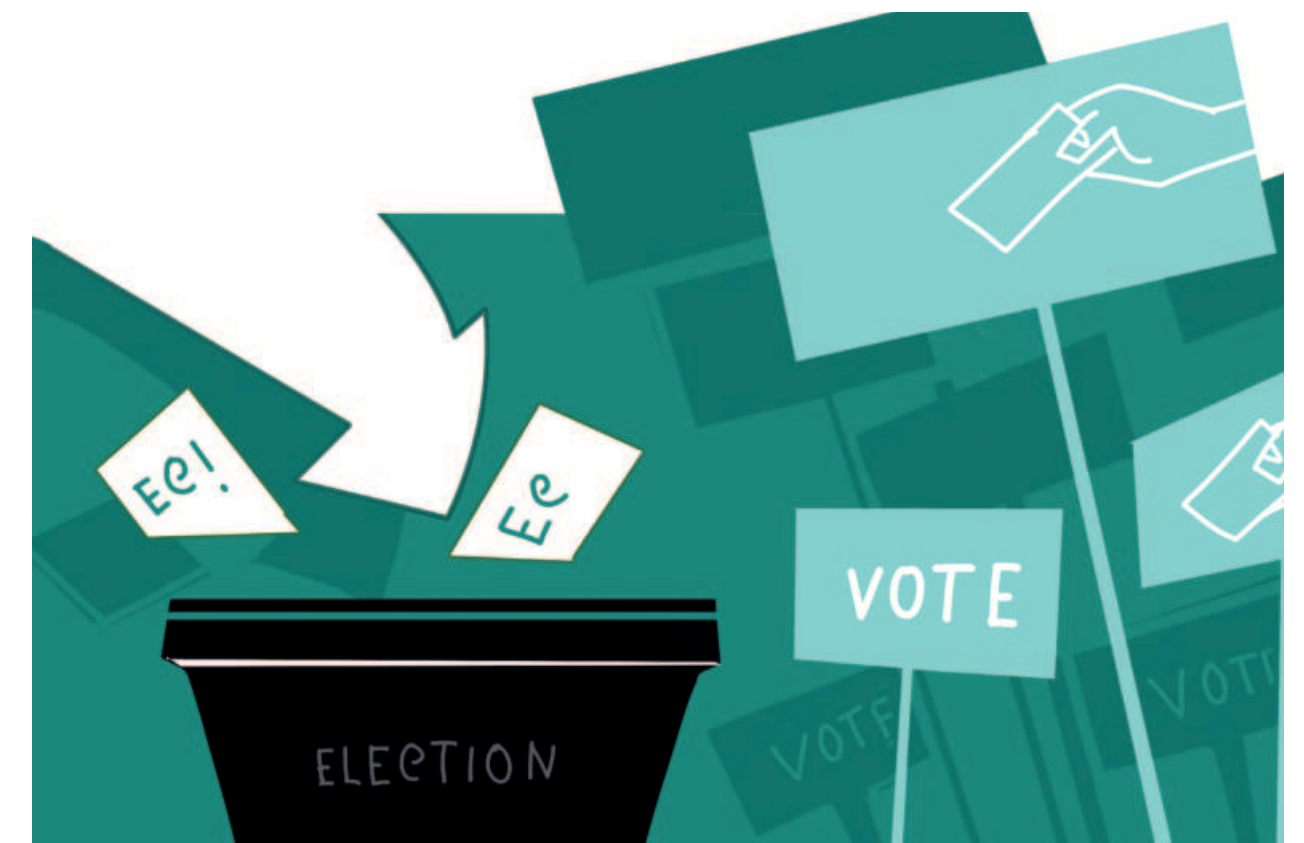


ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY

curve has been moving upwards while our democracy curve has followed an opposite trajectory. The reality today is that our advancement in the economic field is being overshadowed by our setbacks in freedoms, rights, and institutions of accountability. This fact, our government and its leadership do not seem to fully understand. The question it should be asking itself is that after so much development, especially in infrastructure and energy, why widespread dissatisfaction should still exist. The denial of this fact is what has isolated the ruling party from the masses, leading it to suspect that a demand for free and fair elections is aimed at a change of guard at the highest level. With such a record of economic success, it is the Awami League who should confidently move towards an acceptable election and not make questionable laws that further fuel suspicion as to their intentions.

The government move that really launched the downward trend in our democracy, especially the nature and quality of our representative government, is the abolition by the parliament, on June 30, 2011, of the caretaker government system for holding elections. It was done on the basis of a "short order" of a few lines by the Appellate Division, presided over by the then Chief Justice ABM Khairul Haque, delivered on May 10, 2011. Interestingly, the short order also

crippling hartals, and resignation from parliament following endless walkouts. The way the two subsequent elections – in 2014 and 2018 – were conducted clearly revealed why the ruling party abolished the caretaker government system.

As the world is now looking at us to see how we are preparing for the upcoming national polls, our government has just passed a law that clearly reduces the Election Commission's independence in conducting elections. The amendment bars the EC from cancelling election results and allows it to withhold polling only at specific centres where irregularities occur. The law minister said the EC shouldn't have such powers, it is anti-democratic. But shouldn't the EC have the power to make up its own mind? What happens if violence occurs in the majority of the polling centres in a constituency? Shouldn't the EC suspend the election in the entire constituency even then? The amendment has been kept vague on this point. This will ultimately result in restraining the EC. Experience shows that when a law is vague, the authorities usually shy away from stern action, especially if the candidate is from the incumbent side of the political divide.

The other crucial amendment is shortening the time period during which the EC can act. Previously, it was from the date of the announcement

If we really believe in the EC's independence, why tie its hands in this manner?

If an election is ultimately the expression of the "public will," measures must be taken so that it can be expressed without fear, especially of repercussions. The institution that is at the centre of the whole process, the EC, must be given full authority and freedom to act, as specified by the constitution. Curtailing its power, that also in the name of democracy, and with the 2014 and 2018 elections still fresh in our memory, really does not cut much ice. A repressive legal structure cannot be expected to deliver a free public will. There have been several promises of amending laws such as the Digital Security Act (DSA) and others, and also restraining law enforcement members from inappropriately using their powers. There is no evidence of that happening yet.

If politics is the art of compromise, we seem never to have heard of it. If elections are the mechanism of peaceful transfer of power, we never want to practise it. And if democracy is the system where all political parties have a level playing field, we just don't want to play that game.

Can we solve in the next few months what we have been unable to in the last three decades? If we fail, what prospect does it hold for our future?

## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# The US and India's non-aligned alliance



Shashi Tharoor,  
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SHASHI THAROOR

Indian PM Narendra Modi is riding high. His triumphant visit to Washington, which featured a state dinner at the White House and a rare second address to a joint session of Congress, appears to mark a new chapter in the relationship between India and the United States.

Modi's visit was preceded by several major breakthroughs, including the recent US-India initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology, which seeks to foster bilateral collaboration on technologies. US semiconductor manufacturer Micron Technology recently announced that it plans to invest \$825 million in a new chip assembly and testing facility in India.

The US and India have also unveiled several defence agreements, which have not been previously extended to a country that is not formally an ally and highlight the intensifying bilateral defence partnership.

The US' preference for alliances with anti-communist regimes led the US to establish relationships with a series of increasingly Islamist dictatorships

in Pakistan. Meanwhile, India's non-aligned democracy gravitated towards the secular Soviet Union. Non-alignment was not well-received in the US, where President Dwight Eisenhower's Secretary of State John Foster Dulles famously declared that "neutrality between good and evil is itself evil."

The end of the Cold War, together with the reorientation of India's foreign policy and its integration into the global economy, led to improvement in US-India relations, but India's detonation of a nuclear device in 1998 triggered US-led economic sanctions. President Bill Clinton's visit to India in 2000, his final year in office, marked a major turning point, and George W Bush's administration built on the momentum by signing a defence agreement with India in 2005 and a landmark accord on civil nuclear cooperation in 2008. The positive trend persisted under both Obama and Trump, and now appears to have reached a zenith under President Biden.

Today, the US seems much more willing to accommodate India's post-colonial obsession with strategic autonomy. This shift has been partly driven by China's geopolitical assertiveness under President Xi Jinping, which represents a radical departure from his predecessors' adherence to the doctrine of China's "peaceful rise." The US clearly views China as its primary adversary and has been actively pursuing regional alliances to counter its growing influence.

India has traditionally been reluctant to pick sides, but China's repeated encroachments on its territory across the disputed Himalayan border, and its killing of 20 Indian soldiers in June 2020, have rendered neutrality untenable. While India maintains its independent posture, the recent G7 summit in Hiroshima notably included the second-ever in-person Quad summit between Biden, Modi, Japanese PM Fumio Kishida, and Australian PM Anthony Albanese.

The message to China is clear. While India maintains that it is not a US ally (but a partner), it has increasingly aligned itself with the democratic West in its escalating rivalry with communist China.

But it would be a mistake to view India-US relations solely through a Chinese lens. The US and India have far more in common than is generally acknowledged: democracy, a common

language, and dedication to fostering innovation and entrepreneurship.

The most important factor contributing to the deepening ties between the US and India is the growing number of Indian-Americans, which exceeds four million. Indian-Americans are disproportionately affluent, with the highest median income of any US ethnic group, including Whites. They are also becoming an increasingly influential voting bloc, and their prominent roles in political fundraising, on Congressional staffs, and in government offices have given rise to a so-called Samosa Caucus. The US has had two governors and seven members of Congress of Indian heritage. US Vice-President Kamala Harris's mother is Indian, and Former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley – currently running for president – is the daughter of Punjabi Sikh parents.

In the past, it was often said that Pakistan was a US ally but not a friend, while India was a friend but not an ally. With the US out of Afghanistan, Pakistan has become a less significant ally. But while India still isn't one, owing to its insistence on strategic autonomy, even US sceptics who say the two countries' interests are more aligned than their values concede that those interests warrant closer cooperation. Modi's visit was one more indication of how close that cooperation has become.