

The Daily Star

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A black spot on Dhaka-17 by-polls

Attack on Hero Alom is condemnable

The attack on Hero Alom, an independent candidate of the just-concluded Dhaka-17 by-election, after forcing him to leave a polling centre, is a black spot in an otherwise uneventful and predictable election. Reportedly, the attackers wore badges of "boat" and were ruling party supporters. The meagre voter turnout – of only 11.51 percent – reflected the lack of enthusiasm for an election with no serious challenger to the ruling party candidate, the winner being left with a position of Member of Parliament (MP) for only a few months. His victory was, frankly, a forgone conclusion, and in that sense, bears no significance.

What we would like to highlight, however, is the mindset behind the violent attack on Hero Alom. The assault was typical of ruling party supporters becoming overenthusiastic about proving their loyalty to their high-ups by resorting to intimidation of a rival candidate. Whether or not it was a party decision – or one instigated by the ruling party candidate, who has criticised the attack and said that an investigation should be carried out – will be proven by what action the AL takes on the attackers. But it is undeniable that these supporters felt empowered enough to openly swoop on Hero Alom and felt there would be no consequences for their actions.

Also, what about the role of the police? While they tried to intervene when the situation was escalating within the polling centre premises, they took no action once Hero Alom ran outside the centre, and was thrown onto the street, beaten up and then chased by the attackers when he started to dart off in fear. How can the police explain their inaction when there were police personnel present? We can only imagine what could have happened if Hero Alom had not been able to escape.

The onus to prevent such violence is on the ruling party. We would like to see its leadership give out a clear message to its supporters – not just in words but through stern action – that indulging in violence to prove party loyalty will not be accepted. In this particular case, the attack should be severely condemned and the perpetrators given exemplary punishment for their crime. Moreover, the Election Commission and other relevant authorities must investigate why the police did not protect the victim when he was outside the centre. Their claim that the incident happened outside the centre and did not interfere with the voting does not absolve them of the responsibility to protect all candidates and maintain law and order both inside and outside polling centres, especially in the close proximity of where the voting takes place.

Brutal treatment of students at a school

Such incidents must never occur again at any educational institution

We are shocked at the death of a ninth grade student – Raj Pratap Das – allegedly at the hands of his own teachers at the Kaliganj upazila of Satkhira. According to witnesses and locals, Raj passed away hours after several of his school teachers "tortured" him. One of his peers said Raj and several other students had bought a cake to celebrate the birthday of two peers. They were cutting the cake in an empty classroom when Assistant Head Teacher MA Muhit, assistant teachers Abakash Chandra Kha, Monirul Islam and Sidhartha Roy Chowdhury, and several others barged in and started beating them. One of the teachers even kicked Raj on his chest.

After the initial beating, Raj and three other students were taken to the headteacher's room and assaulted again. Reportedly, he and another student then fell to the floor and touched the headteacher's feet asking for mercy, after which they were dismissed. Following such hideous treatment, Raj fell sick and left for home, but only to die within half an hour.

The episode as described in our report sounds almost unreal. How could teachers, whose primary responsibility is to care for students and make sure they stay safe, stoop so low as to beat one to death? And that, too, for celebrating the birthday of his fellow students? Raj and his friends had committed no crime nor any indiscretion. And even if they were guilty of any misdemeanour, under no circumstances can an adult teacher raise their hands on a minor student.

The teachers in question have denied the allegations, claiming they simply slapped Raj twice for celebrating birthdays at school – which itself is completely out of line – and had scolded others. The headteacher also made the insensitive remark that Raj had likely committed suicide out of shame. Regardless of which version of the story is true, what it shows is that these teachers completely lacked any sensitivity to teach anyone, and that their action contributed to Raj's death. But to find out to what extent, there needs to be an immediate and thorough investigation into the matter.

Should they be found guilty, the teachers must be punished so that such incidents never happen again at our educational institutions. Schools and colleges across the country must be reminded that their teachers and staff cannot lay hands on students and that the latter deserve to be treated with care.

New Message

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What message emanates from the attack on Hero Alom?



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KAMAL AHMED

The shocking assault on Ashraful Alom (better known as Hero Alom), who is largely deemed a political and cultural outcast, that took place in the poshest neighbourhood of our capital has been termed as "unfortunate" by Election Commissioner Md Alamgir. His narration of events taking place at the Banani Bidyaniketan School and College polling centre is completely different from what the media have reported, and what more than a dozen video clips available on social media platforms show. One may wonder from where the commissioner got his briefing.

While speaking to reporters at the Election Commission, Alamgir admitted that the EC was yet to know the actual picture, but happily blamed Hero Alom for the whole incident. Election Commissioner Md Alamgir said, "An independent candidate tried to enter a polling centre with his supporters and at least 70 YouTubers." According to him, as police tried to stop them, the candidate engaged in an altercation with the law enforcers. He also said, "The incident did not take place inside the polling station. Some people chased him when he came out onto the road and may have assaulted him."

His suggestion that the incident took place outside the centre was quite similar to the response a police officer at the centre had given to journalists when asked why law enforcers were not rescuing Hero Alom from the attackers. In video footage, the same police officer could be heard saying that he and his team were responsible for the cordon inside the polling centre and incidents outside the centre were outside their remit. Shockingly, a number of video clips showed members of the police team responsible for inner cordon escorting Hero Alom from the main building to the school gate and leaving him there without arranging further escort, despite the fact that there was greater danger awaiting him. It was almost like handing the candidate over to a hostile mob. This happened despite the Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner's pledge to ensure peace and maintain law and order in Dhaka-17 constituency.

Unfortunately, Election Commissioner Alamgir's statement



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Unfortunately, Monday's incident was not the first time that Hero Alom was subjected to physical assault.

could be termed as a seal of approval of police's partisan behaviour. It also raises a crucial question about the EC's ability and willingness to be responsible for maintaining law and order and ensuring the physical safety of candidates during elections.

Monday's incident was not the first time that Hero Alom was subjected to physical assault. He was also assaulted on the very first day of his official campaigning, and we haven't heard anything about bringing the perpetrators to justice. Previously, Hero Alom was also assaulted in 2018, while visiting a polling centre of the Bogura-4 constituency, allegedly by members of the ruling Awami League. He, however, became a serious contender during the by-poll in the same constituency four years later in February this year, and lost only by 834 votes.

Hero Alom may have been ostracised by our political and cultural elites, but he has a huge fan base among the poor and working class. Last year, he was summoned by police for covering

a Tagore song, because some people alleged that Alom was desecrating the sanctity of our culture. There's little doubt that he doesn't have what it takes to be a soft and sophisticated singer, but that doesn't mean his coarse voice has to be suppressed. He may also lack all the traits required to become a politician, but his right to aspire to become one must not be

have picked a fight with Alom and not with the other candidates, including the Jatiya Party nominee?

Many may argue that it was a blunder committed by some fringe elements of the ruling party. But that makes for a very weak argument, as party managers were fully aware of the importance and significance of having a clean and untainted by-poll at the

denied. As for those who decry Hero Alom's rise by saying it's the result of a famine of creativity or sophistication, their argument for cultural elitism sadly supports suppression and repression by the state or by those who have authority.

The attack that we witnessed against Hero Alom in Banani on Monday bore the resonance of such suppression, especially when the attackers were heard saying, "He does Tiktok, he is a joker, why does he want to be the MP of Gulshan-Banani? Does he know what 'MP' means?" As the attackers were wearing the boat symbol, representing the ruling Awami League, are we to assume that they believe the right to aspire to become a MP is reserved only for those who belong to their party?

The attack also reveals that Hero Alom was being seen as the lone challenger who really had a chance of beating the AL candidate, regardless of his social standing, educational background, and lack of a party's backing. Otherwise, why would they

constituency which houses almost all Western diplomatic missions. These are the missions that have been calling for a free, fair, and peaceful national election and not a repetition of either the one-sided affair of 2014 or the alleged pre-polls, nighttime ballot-stuffing of 2018. Furthermore, this incident happened within a week of the prime minister's assurance to a US delegation that the government will ensure a free and fair election.

So, how does one explain this violence unleashed against a rival candidate? Could it be that the government has decided to ignore the international community's concerns and is thinking about forcing through a one-sided election, if the BNP and other parties decide to boycott it? The EC's inability to conduct a by-poll fairly and peacefully, could push the European Union to not deploy observers. This, in turn, could help the ruling party surpass increasingly close international scrutiny. That is, indeed, a concerning thought.

Our climate budget needs some adjustments



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In his speech presenting the FY2023-24 budget proposal, the finance minister talked about climate change to a great extent. He didn't focus much on climate change impacts; rather, he emphasised the ongoing and future investments in a wide range of adaptation and mitigation measures, including climate-smart agriculture, gender responsive climate action, and preparing the future generations with proper climate education. The government's attention to climate action is further reflected in the FY24 climate budget of Tk 37,052 crore, which is 8.99 percent of the allocations for 25 ministries and divisions combined, 4.86 percent of the country's total budget, and 0.74 percent of the GDP.

However, the new climate budget has a few shortcomings, too. First, we see anomalies in the same budget figure in different documents. For example, the actual expenditure for FY20 is stated to be Tk 18,918 crore in FY24's document, Tk 18,025 crore in FY23's document, and Tk 17,924 crore in FY22's document. For FY22, the revised budgets are Tk 28,363 crore in FY24's document and Tk 26,407 crore in FY23's document. The FY23 climate

budget is cited to be Tk 32,409 crore in FY24's document, but Tk 30,532 crore in FY23's document. Some of these variations are as big as almost Tk 2,000 crore. The Finance Division needs to urgently fix these inconsistencies.

Second, Bangladesh has been preparing country-wide disaster/climate vulnerability maps down to union level for long. Capacity-building of local government institutions, vulnerable communities, and civil society organisations to prepare and implement climate action plans using diverse funding mechanisms were also tried by different donor-funded projects over the last two decades. The Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme Phase II (CDMP II, 2010-2014) and its innovative Local Disaster Risk Reduction Fund (LDRRF) are good examples. The Local Government Initiative on Climate Change (LoGIC, 2016-2023) is a more recent initiative, where vulnerability-based adaptation is advocated for, and actions of union parshads are financed through Performance-Based Climate Resilience Grants (PBCRG). Despite such long-standing needs and experience so far, in the latest climate budget, we only see division-wise allocations of the

Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF).

Third, over the last few years, the world has increasingly been talking about youth engagement in climate debates and actions. But, interestingly, Bangladesh's youth ministry or its Department of Youth Development (DYD) isn't one of the 25 ministries and divisions receiving climate-relevant allocations. This is surprising since youth is the crucial part of our workforce, and climate-resilient, green employment has long been promoted by different development agencies. It is therefore important that the ministry and the DYD identify their climate-relevant allocations, and the Finance Division properly include them in the climate budget of FY25.

Fourth, in addition to annual allocations and expenditures by the government agencies, Bangladesh's climate budget also documents ongoing and planned climate actions; these lists, however, vary from year to year. For example, the BCCTF's ministry-wise allocations have always been part of the climate budget. But other related information talks about funding needs, rather than the available funds. The Nationally Determined Contribution's (NDC) intervention-wise funding needs, for example, is as old as the climate budget, while a list of climate-relevant projects of the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 was introduced in FY20. In 2016, the Country Investment Plan for Environment, Forestry and Climate Change (EFCC-CIP) was launched with a big expectation, and its programme-wise fund allocations found their place in the climate budgets of FY20 to

FY22. The long list of pipeline projects for the Green Climate Fund (GCF) had a shorter life, spanning over FY21 and FY22.

In the new climate budget, three new items are included: six ongoing GCF projects, nine ongoing Global Environment Facility (GEF) projects, and funding requirements for 113 priority interventions of the National Adaptation Plan of Bangladesh (2023-2050) (NAP2050), which the government approved in October 2022. While listing down how much money we need to implement the climate plans gives us a sense of direction, progress of funding these plans should be tracked as well. Therefore, future climate budgets should include a section on financing the Delta Plan, the NAP2050, the NDC, and the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCPP).

Finally, while the new national budget is 2.6 times larger than that of FY2015-16, its climate budget grew by 3.1 times over the same period. To improve the accountability in climate finance, the Finance Division should move away from publishing PDF documents on its website, and establish a "Bangladesh Climate Finance Portal." This portal will bring together the climate budget-related information on different government agencies, development partners, climate pots, and climate action plans in one place, making it easier to understand their interlinkages, while tackling some of the shortcomings mentioned above. In this way, we will be able to track the real investments in tackling the climate crisis, thus avoiding sectoral and geographical overfunding, underfunding, and double counting.