

Political tensions near a boiling point?



THE STREET VIEW

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MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

On June 12, Barishal city mayoral candidate Syed Faizul Karim came under attack by ruling party men. Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibur Awal dismissed the wave of questions levelled at his office saying, "He did not die, did he?" The CEC said he "didn't see him bleeding," as if death or bloodshed are the only determinants of violence in elections. Soon after his comments, Awal faced severe criticism and it took around 14 days for him to publicly regret his remarks, with an additional allegation that the media had distorted his words.

More than a month later, on July 17, Dhaka-17 by-election independent candidate Ashraf Hossain, better known as Hero Alom, was physically assaulted and forced to leave a polling centre in Banani that he had gone to inspect. This time, the EC demanded that authorities form a judicial inquiry committee to investigate the attack. This also means that the EC will not take any actions by itself, but will limit itself to writing to the authorities concerned. To make the optics even worse, the attack on Hero Alom took place while a European Union exploratory team was visiting Dhaka and holding talks with various stakeholders to assess the electoral atmosphere.

The July 17 attack created a huge buzz in the political and international arenas. Opposition parties queried that if the ruling party could not tolerate candidates like Hero Alom, how would it hold a free and fair election? The missions of 13 countries, including the US, UK, and the EU, expressed concern over the incident. Law enforcers acted promptly, arresting some of Hero Alom's "attackers."

The two instances above provide somewhat of an indication as to how the Election Commission will be handling voting in the 300 constituencies. It has already demonstrated its toothlessness and unquestioning subservience. The state of a single grain can tell one whether all the rice in a pot has cooked or not.

It is in this context that the EC has agreed to register two new political

parties - on paper, at least. One is called Bangladesh Nationalist Movement (BNM) and the other is Bangladesh Supreme Party (BSP). The similarity between the parties' names is perhaps no coincidence; it is a ploy (a rather simplistic one) targeting the main opposition camp to break it up into factions. The EC has naturally come under interrogation after allowing the

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registration of these two small and unknown parties while dropping many active ones. A recent analysis by *Prothom Alo* also questioned whether this quasi-judicial body that is expected to be independent and autonomous could actually be running as per the government's suggestions. What it boils down to is this: if the Commission cannot overrule the simple pressure of registering two paper-based parties who have little or no activity, how would it resist more serious pressures from the ruling party during the election?

The crisis does not end here. If we look at the election itself, the picture is rather alarming. In the by-polls, the ruling party candidate got only around nine percent of the

votes and won the seat to represent Bangladesh's most upscale neighbourhood with a total voter turnout of 12 percent. There is no legal irregularity here, but the win was hardly accorded to the victor with any satisfaction. It certainly begs the question, where have all the voters gone? Sure, by-elections typically see low voter interest since most consider them a "done deal," a feeling that seems to have pervaded people's perception of elections for the last many years. Still, citing the example of Dhaka-10 in 2020 (when only 5.28 percent voters had shown up), the EC could perhaps get away with saying that it has done better than previous by-polls.

But the instances of the Dhaka-10 and Dhaka-17 by-polls make one wonder about Awami League's staunch voter base, which is around 35-40 percent. If the last election is to be considered a benchmark, then it consists of well over 75 percent of the electorate. The pathetic voter turnout of late would then indicate that either the Awami League is fielding candidates who do not appeal to its own core base of supporters, or that even the party faithfuls have lost interest in the election process and prefer to stay home.

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One could say that Awami League has lost its last chance to show people that it is at least considering free and fair elections, or that the EC will be impartial - that there is at least a sliver of a chance that the upcoming national election will not be another landslide for the ruling party. The Election Commission's stance, the ruling party activists assaulting a candidate they simply did not approve of, the main opposition camp threatening to boycott the election if the government does not step down, and the ruling government being adamant on overseeing the election ("according to the Constitution," it keeps harping on) are all slowly, but worryingly, pushing the political mercury up. Will it reach the boiling point?



Female athletes are more susceptible to injuries than male athletes, which is now a very big cause of concern in women's football. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

The uphill battle for women in sports



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For women, carving out a space for themselves in sports has always been an uphill battle. When women play, they transcend the mere act of competing against their opponents. They play for something far more significant: the promotion of their sport and their rightful place in the sporting world. But why is it that, in the 21st century, women still do not get due recognition and respect for their athletic abilities, or the support to nurture those skills?

Lucy Bronze is a four-time Champions League winner, a European Champion, four-time PFA Women's Player of the Year, Fifa's Best Women's Player in 2020, and holds various accolades earned from her achievements in football. Her profile in women's football is immense, yet very few people outside of women's football actually know who she is.

Iga Swiatek is 22 years old and has already won four Grand Slams in tennis. Her first one came in when she was aged 19, the same age Carlos Alcaraz was when he won his first US Open title. Compare the number of headlines Alcaraz got to what Swiatek got, and the difference is staggering. Why? A significant reason is that female athletes are not marketed well enough. If you look at the amount of money spent on marketing male athletes compared to women, there is an astounding difference. Marketing has become an integral part of modern sports. The space allotted to female athletes in newspapers is too small to notice, billboards celebrate more male achievements than female ones, and television studios broadcast almost every male sport but will only air a few major matches of women athletes, that too for selected sports.

With the conversation about why the visibility of women in sports is so poor, the most common defence that is used is that women's sport does not attract as many fans. That

is quite untrue. In fact, women's football is actually one of the fastest-growing sports in the world. Attendance for the domestic league has gone up by 200 percent, and Sky, the official broadcasting partner of the Women's Super League, reported 16 million viewers during the 2022 calendar year. The ICC Women's T20 World Cup in 2023 acquired a 790 percent increase in viewership compared to 2020. Several of the women's tennis Grand Slam finals brought in a larger audience than men's.

There is no doubt that there is disparity in the quality of play between male and women's sports. But how can we expect our female athletes to play at the same level as men when the facilities and the pathways to development for the respective parties are still miles apart? In most countries, very few women actually play sports as a pastime, let alone for a career. Outside the US and Europe, the early participation of primary-school-aged girls in sports is very poor. Accessibility to development programmes is almost non-existent and there are no clear pathways for aspiring athletes. The domestic competitions are poorly organised, very few sponsors and broadcasters are brought in, or the leagues are not sustainable. The very root of success in sports is early development. And until we actually invest in this, women's sports will continue to suffer.

Male athletes have access to a larger pool of development pathways, better coaching, and more sponsors and exposure to advance their careers. They also have access to world-class facilities, higher quality training centres, and technology to springboard them to the top of their respective sport. Comparing the quality of men's sports to women's sports is illogical. Women's sports are still 50 years

behind in terms of development and trying to catch up with the standards of their male counterparts. That standard will only be attainable for women athletes when there is constant and thorough development across all fields in a sport. This responsibility does not start and end with international sporting organisations; it also trickles down to our local sports authorities.

Then, there are injuries. Female athletes are more susceptible to injuries than male athletes, which is now a very big cause of concern in women's football. In just the past year, 195 elite women footballers suffered ACL injuries (an overstretching or tearing of the anterior cruciate ligament in one's knee). For many players, ACL injuries can hasten retirement, while those who are able to continue tend to see a substantial decline in their calibre. The equipment, including the shoes provided to female athletes, is mostly designed for male ones. It is not possible for anyone to play at the highest sporting level with gear that is not made to cater to their specific needs. Major organisations such as the WTA, ICC, Fifa, and FIBA need to actively invest in research on injury prevention, while athletic brands such as Nike, PUMA, and Adidas must continue their efforts in creating products that are designed solely for female athletes.

The disparity between male and female athletes will always exist to a certain level. However, it is important to continue investing in order to reduce that disparity. It is also vital to keep in mind that men's sports and women's sports are ultimately not the same. The playing styles are different, the tactics are unique in each, and female athletes bring different strengths to every sport. It is understandable if a format does not pique one's interest, but that does not rationalise the argument of "nobody wants to watch it." There is a huge demand for women's sports, and it is high time we support it. Who knows how many female sporting greats we have missed out on due to our failure in advocating and developing sports for our girls? For now, we can only hope that, someday, female athletes will simply be able to play their sport without having to become advocates for better conditions at every turn.

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Friday
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Fee Structure

Description	Fees (BDT)
Admission Fee	8,000/-
Seminar Library Fee	2,000/-
Computer Lab Fee	10,000/-
Development Fee	5,000/-
Semester Fee (7,000/- per semester)	7,000/- x 3=21,000/-
Tuition Fee (36 credits/12 courses) (7,000/- per course)	7,000/- x 12=84,000/-
Total Cost	1,30,000/-

Key Dates

Application Deadline	August 04, 2023
Admission Test	August 11, 2023
Result Published	August 12, 2023
Date of Admission	August 13 to August 31, 2023
Orientation	September 08, 2023
Commencement of Class	September 08, 2023

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Pride members
6 Miles off
10 Flynn of film
11 O'Neill forte
12 Rum drink
13 Top story
14 Addition column
15 Face
16 Gift tag word
17 Polite address
18 - Alamos sections
22 Leg bend
23 Ship staff
26 Boons for fliers
29 Golf position
32 Operated
33 Gloss target

DOWN

1 Excuse from punishment
2 Tree with tough wood
3 Get Chinese, say
4 Auction bids
5 Cunning
6 Fine study
7 Deadly
8 Pal for Pedro

ACROSS

34 Sign up
36 Dojo doings
37 Suspect's defense
38 Pool fill
39 Glossy fabric
40 News item
41 Some sheep
42 Scrumptious

DOWN

9 Track events
11 Some farmers
15 Through
17 Administers an oath to
20 Game caller
21 Shop tool
24 Greetings, in a way
25 Prop for Poseidon
27 Squealer
28 Sleek and stylish
29 Renter's paper
30 Spouse's kin
31 Select group
35 Wading bird
36 Coffee, slangily
38 Dripping

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

P	A	P	A	S	R	A	D	A	R	
O	V	E	R	T	A	D	O	R	E	
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L	A	T	I	N		A	K	I	T	E
E	R	E	C	T		R	I	D	E	S

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