

We need dialogue, yes, but can EC do its job?

EC must create a level playing field for all parties

As the institution constitutionally mandated to uphold the most fundamental democratic right of citizens, the Election Commission occupies an unrivalled position that lends anything it says on this subject an air of authority. So when the CEC talks about the importance of dialogue to end the current political impasse, we cannot help but take notice. “The crises are political. If they are resolved politically, it will be much easier for the Election Commission to conduct the election,” he says. We cannot agree more. The problem is, the EC itself being part of the crisis – and its failure to restore trust in its ability to do its job – renders such assertions pointless.

The BNP is currently waging a one-point movement for the government’s resignation in favour of elections under a non-party interim administration. Ideally, an independent EC should be its own island, unaffected by the debate over who sits at the helm of the election-time government. Unfortunately, ours is not. On Tuesday, a central leader of BNP reiterated their opposition to the EC, saying “People who should not be at the Election Commission have gained the positions.” BNP, ever since this EC was formed, has raised questions about its neutrality, a position frequently vindicated when the latter took us through one questionable decision after another. It doesn’t also help that when the CEC passes the baton onto political entities, he does so with such generalisation and perfunctoriness that robs it of any seriousness.

What, for example, does he mean when he says “political parties should sit together”? Which parties is he talking about? Why coy about it when everyone knows who they are? And who will take the initiative for dialogue? As the party in power, it is Awami League that must take the first step toward dialogue. But BNP too has the responsibility to help create a conducive environment for that. All this is easier said than done, however. The level of animosity between the two camps has reached a point that makes broad political consensus difficult to achieve, with both parties fiercely facing off on the streets to fulfil their own agenda. While talking to our correspondent, representatives of both parties again reiterated their uncompromising stances.

The EC’s role in resolving this situation is no less significant than the political stakeholders of elections. It is time for the EC to go beyond mere rhetoric and take decisive actions to create an environment conducive to free and fair elections. It must demonstrate its impartiality, now more than ever before, and create a level playing field for all political parties. The call for dialogue is not enough; it must actively facilitate and mediate such discussions.

The Rohingya must be repatriated soon

The Chinese initiative in this regard is commendable

It has been around six years since Bangladesh took in over one million Rohingya people and gave them shelter in Cox’s Bazar despite facing many social, economic and environmental challenges. The government has done so on humanitarian grounds, and with international assistance, providing them with all the basic facilities they need to live in the refugee camps. Historically, Bangladesh has been hosting the Rohingya since 1977-1978 when the first wave of refugees fled to our shores from Myanmar’s Arakan state. However, in August 2017, we saw the latest and largest such influx. In total, we’re currently hosting more than 1.2 million forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals, which has become quite a struggle for us given that international funding for the Rohingya has been waning fast.

Bangladesh signed a repatriation agreement with Myanmar in November 2017, and made two attempts – in 2018 and 2019 – to return the forcibly displaced Rohingya, but without any success. While the international community assisted Bangladesh with funds, they failed to put sufficient pressure on Myanmar to start the repatriation process. Against this backdrop, we really appreciate the Chinese initiative to start the Rohingya repatriation process soon.

Reportedly, Chinese Special Envoy for Asian Affairs Deng Xijun has recently hinted that Myanmar may take back the Rohingya living in Cox’s Bazar to their own villages in North Maungdaw and nearby places, instead of any camps or “model villages” which the Myanmar authorities had planned earlier. We hope that this will indeed be the case, since the Rohingya living in Bangladesh do not want to go back to their country and live in confined facilities where their rights may not be ensured. In fact, earlier this year, a group of Rohingya visited the Rakhine state to observe the conditions for their return and found the situation to be not conducive. They demanded that they be settled back in their original villages with their safety and citizenship rights guaranteed. Another demand raised by them was that all of a family should be repatriated together, which is indeed very important. Moreover, arrangements should be made to ensure their livelihood, education and freedom of mobility. We hope that all these legitimate demands will be met by the Myanmar authorities before the repatriation process finally starts.

That being said, we sincerely thank the Chinese government for taking this initiative for Rohingya repatriation. However, for the process to be successful and acceptable to all parties, particularly the Rohingya refugees, there is an urgent need to engage the international community in the process. We hope the repatriation process would start at the earliest, with the international community playing an effective and enthusiastic role.

Who do you think they (foreign observers) are?



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KAMAL AHMED

The highly publicised appearance of a new poll monitoring group appears to have impressed many of us in Bangladesh with their high-level interactions with the Election Commission, ministers and a few other politicians. They were joined by quite a few foreigners, too, who expressed their full confidence in the EC’s ability to organise fair elections. It was probably the current EC’s first formal meeting on the issue of election monitoring with some “to be monitors.” Though Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibur Awal and four other commissioners spent about an hour in a meeting with those local and foreign so-called observers, there was no communicate or statement issued on the EC’s behalf.

Unfortunately, colleagues in the media who covered the event didn’t tell us anything beyond what the chief of the local monitoring organisation and his foreign companions told them. As far as we know, the EC is yet to announce the list of the poll monitoring organisations who received their accreditation for the next general election. The EC website has only one list containing 118 civil society organisations (CSO), which dates back to 2018, and the Election Monitoring Forum (EMF) is not one of them. But, interestingly, EMF chief Abed Ali’s name is listed as the secretary-general of Saarc Human Rights Foundation (SHRF).

EMF and SHRF are two names that should ring a bell with readers as they hit the headlines in local and foreign media in 2018 when some so-called international observers brought in by these two groups certified the much discredited December 30 parliamentary election as not only free, fair and peaceful, but a “glowing example for other democratic countries.” Few weeks later, some of those observers regretted making that statement. One of the foreign observers, Tanya Foster, who visited Bangladesh with her daughter, told Reuters that they had never acted as international observers to a national election before.

The EMF website doesn’t have any information about its history, such as when it was founded, whether it is a registered non-government organisation, and how or who finances their activities. However, it lists former Election Commissioner Md Shahnewaz as a director and another former Election Commissioner Brig Gen (ret’d) Shahadat Hossain Chowdhury as a special adviser. Interestingly, EMF’s name first appeared in relation to the election that was held under Brig Gen Chowdhury’s commission, though it was not accredited for election observation, but somehow associated with SHRF in



Canadian citizen Tanya Foster, who visited Bangladesh with her daughter during the 2018 election, told Reuters that they had never acted as international observers to a national election before.

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bringing in foreign monitors.

One other crucial piece of information that emerged about the SHRF following the 2018 election monitoring report was that it had nothing to do with the South Asian regional grouping Saarc, but used their logo without authorisation. The foundation’s advisory board also had prominent members of the ruling coalition, including Awami League MP Obaidul Muqtadir Chowdhury as its president. The Facebook page of Prof Abed Ali, now president of the EMF and secretary-general of SHRF, also contains a good number of photographs depicting his close association with the ruling party.

It is, therefore, quite intriguing as to why the EC felt it necessary to hold a meeting with an organisation that does not have a clean history of poll monitoring. How can an organisation having well-publicised political links qualify for such a preferential treatment? Did the presence of two former election commissioners on the EMF board somehow influence the current EC to entertain them well before finalising the observers’ list? Can a local observer group bring in foreigners for poll monitoring bypassing the EC, who alone has the legal authority to scrutinise and approve international monitors?

According to Prothom Alo, Abed Ali now admits that two of the four foreigners are journalists and therefore can be termed as observers. However, the EC has a very different accreditation process for foreign journalists.

There are published guidelines for election observation (international observers) on the EC website posted in November 2018, presumably still valid,

clearly providing the route for applying and getting approval for all foreigners willing to monitor our elections. The guidelines also include a code of conduct, which states, “Maintain strict political impartiality.” Does the EC now see those so-called international observers’ partisan comments on a very divisive political issue made to the media as violation of the code, and

investment in international public relations firms to bolster the international image; and ensuring sympathetic observers from other countries via bilateral parliamentary bodies.

Their observation that the first two techniques have become widespread among all autocratic regimes can easily be drawn into our 2018 experience.

will it take some visible action against them, such as debarring them from poll observation?

The importance of election monitoring can’t be overemphasised. Many of us think it only happens in Third World countries like ours. But that’s not true. Both local and international observers regularly observe elections in the United States. Each state of the US has its own law regulating observers, but one thing is essential and common, which is political neutrality of the observers. The Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) routinely sends observer missions to the US during general and midterm elections following invitations.

Unfortunately, due to the nature of our politics and the lack of mutual trust and respect among major contending parties, the issue of election observation has also become an issue of contention and mistrust, which in turn has made the role of international observers even more crucial. With gradual weakening of democracy and rise of authoritarianism, the ruling party seems, at least in some powerful quarters in the government, to have opted to follow the tactics deployed by some other autocratic regimes around the world.

These tricks have been identified by the European Parliament’s Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI), which it describes as “a mock compliance strategy” to achieve external validation. Their tactics include: gatekeeper tactics with highly regulated accreditation schemes to avoid larger and renowned professional observers; observation schemes including national/regional/international “fake observers”;

One may recount the example of ANFREL, Asia’s largest and most credible observer organisation, which had to abandon their Bangladesh monitoring mission owing to visa and accreditation issues. The story of SHRF hosting foreign observers is no different from the second tactic listed by the DROI.

Recognising the crucial role international observers can play in validating genuine elections, more than 20 leading international and regional organisations and institutions have formulated and endorsed a declaration of principles for international election observation and a code of conduct for international election observers. It has been in force since 2005, and any individual or organisation that does not follow this code can’t be considered as an international observer.

Article II of the declaration reads, “A decision by any organisation to organise an international election observation mission or to explore the possibility of organising an observation mission does not imply that the organisation necessarily deems the election process in the country holding the elections to be credible. An organisation should not send an international election observation mission to a country under conditions that make it likely that its presence will be interpreted as giving legitimacy to a clearly undemocratic electoral process, and international election observation missions in any such circumstance should make public statements to ensure that their presence does not imply such legitimacy.” Shouldn’t we take note of these universally accepted principles and codes before calling anyone an international observer?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Striking a balance between development and environmental conservation

The concept of a “green economy,” advocated by environmental economists, aims to balance environmental sustainability and development projects. It emphasises the mutual benefit of economic growth and environmental sustainability. However, in Bangladesh, a densely populated country, the rate of agricultural land loss exceeds the reported one percent per year. This is because the current practices of development unfortunately ignore the negative impact they can have on the natural environment, water flow, forests, and wildlife habitats.

One major development project undertaken by the government is the Dohazari-Cox’s Bazar rail line project, spanning 100km and requiring the acquisition of 1,364 acres of land. Regrettably, this project has encroached upon agricultural land, wildlife sanctuaries, and densely populated areas. Sustainable development necessitates careful consideration of the consequences associated with such initiatives. In

this case, the railway line has not only taken up 1,364 acres of agricultural and residential land, but it has also rendered an equivalent or larger area of farmland unusable. Furthermore, the railway has disrupted natural water flow in various locations, leading to the disconnection of water centres and the loss of previous irrigation schemes. As a result, agricultural production in these areas is expected to decline.

Additionally, the railway project has displaced some local communities. Those affected are relocating to new areas with compensation, often choosing agricultural land for their new homes. Consequently, the railway line has had a significant impact on agricultural land in southern Chattogram. The railway project has also created the potential for further urbanisation, which could result in more farmland being occupied.

However, addressing the immense pressure on agricultural land in the area gives rise to a new challenge: the construction of bypass roads. These

planned bypass roads, spanning over 20km, would acquire agricultural land and densely populated areas in four locations: Patia, Dohazari, Lohagara, and Chakaria. This will result in the destruction of more agricultural land. In Bangladesh context, highways often lead to the establishment of settlements and industries on adjacent agricultural land, as observed in the case of the Patia bypass. Along both sides of this bypass, which traverses agricultural land, there has been a rapid proliferation of residential and commercial structures. With the construction of a new 20km bypass, a significant portion of the surrounding farmland will effectively be lost forever and will open up opportunities for new settlement constructions. Is there an alternative?

Luckily, the solution lies within the project itself. While bypass roads are planned in four locations, a flyover has been proposed in one area. Expressways have been successfully implemented in various parts of India. Consequently, the

proposed Chattogram-Cox’s Bazar highway should be constructed as an expressway, eliminating the need for the 20km bypass road. This approach would allow long-haul vehicles to bypass congested areas, thus safeguarding our agricultural land, natural waterways, and fish resources.

In the pursuit of sustainable development, it is crucial to strike a balance between development and environmental conservation. Development initiatives must prioritise the preservation of agricultural land, forests, water resources, and wildlife habitats. By exploring alternatives and embracing innovative approaches, we can build a greener and more prosperous future for Bangladesh, ensuring that economic growth goes hand-in-hand with the well-being of our environment.

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