

Bring down prices of eggs urgently

Govt must address factors destabilising the kitchen market

It has been months now that the prices of essentials have been soaring, plunging many middle- and low-income families into financial hardship. Although the government has been trying to tackle the effects of food inflation through various measures, there seems to be little control over the prices of some essential food items, such as eggs, chicken, onions and potatoes.

The latest shock has been the prices of eggs and broiler chicken which are the main sources of protein for middle and lower income groups. Just a month ago, a dozen eggs cost Tk 150 – quite high by any measure – but that has jumped to an unprecedented Tk 170 now. It is depressing to know that those with limited means are being forced to buy “cracked” eggs because they are a few takas cheaper. Others have just cut down on egg consumption, or stopped buying eggs altogether. Broiler chickens have also become more expensive, making even middle-class families reduce their intake.

Various reasons have been cited to explain such spiralling of food prices. These include an overall increase in global prices because of the war in Ukraine leading to hikes in fuel prices, as well as the depreciation of the Taka making import of food items costlier. Curiously, this year, we have seen how prices of certain essentials have shot up even when global prices of the same commodities have gone down. Meanwhile, poultry farmers have made allegations of a syndicate of large businessmen manipulating the market of eggs and chickens and keeping their prices high. In addition, the ongoing floods have destroyed many poultry farms, causing a shortage which may drive prices further up if no action is taken by the government.

In March, the country’s poultry farmers had pleaded to the government to fix the prices of chicken and eggs, saying they were incurring losses even though consumers were paying high prices. We would like to know what action has been taken by the committee that was assigned to devise a strategy to help the livestock ministry set the egg and chicken prices. It is because of the inaction or failure of responsible departments that not just the prices of poultry items, but those of turmeric, garlic and ginger as well as other spices have also gone up.

Often, despite the government setting prices in the kitchen market, the sellers do not adhere to them. Therefore, the government must adopt and implement strict market monitoring policies that will keep prices in check. There are various organisations of the government as well as laws that have been created to keep the prices of essentials under control. The government must activate these organisations and enforce these laws. Most importantly, the authorities must vigorously investigate allegations of manipulating prices of poultry items and clamp down on the syndicates behind them. They must not be allowed to randomly “fix” prices of these commodities.

Aspirant migrants deserve better care

Authorities must properly staff and equip Moulvibazar manpower office

The struggles faced by the Moulvibazar District Manpower and Employment Office stand as a reminder of the manifold challenges that aspiring migrant workers have to grapple with, but also of the haphazard manner in which many government institutions are run. According to our report, this office, in operation since 1997, serves as a conduit for people from Moulvibazar and Habiganj districts pursuing overseas employment opportunities. Its mandate extends beyond registration and fingerprinting – it also encompasses investigating complaints by wronged migrant workers and guiding aspirants on pre- and post-departure procedures. However, its capacity is being severely strained by its meagre workforce.

Reportedly, the office has five official posts (against a requirement of at least eight) – with only three currently occupied. Just imagine: only three. This is nowhere near enough for a region with a rich history of exporting labour. And even though two computer operators have been hired through outsourcing to manage the day-to-day tasks of data registration and fingerprinting, they are unable to cater to the daily influx of around 150 to 200 people seeking services. The situation is further compounded by recurring issues with faulty servers. Reportedly, the provision of services is brought to a halt whenever the system falters – which, we are told, it often does. Over the past two weeks alone, there have been many instances of hopeful registrants being turned away due to server problems. These problems have persisted even after the higher authorities were informed of them several times.

True, many government offices are similarly plagued by staffing limitations and server malfunctions – a modern-day addition to the suffering of people trying to navigate the bureaucratic labyrinths. But their convergence in Moulvibazar embodies the wider struggle faced by aspiring migrant workers in Bangladesh. The story of these people is fraught with uncertainties, delays, and setbacks. We have repeatedly seen how they have had to endure challenges in various stages of their preparation thanks to corruption, irregularities and mismanagement at both the recruiting agencies and public offices overseeing migration. A continuation of this situation flies in the face of the high regard that the authorities publicly show for our remittance earners.

We, therefore, urge the government to address the operational challenges of the Moulvibazar manpower office and ensure it is adequately staffed and equipped. All other similar offices also need to be reviewed so that they can function better. Migrants – as citizens of this country but also because of their storied role in its development – deserve better care and support in every stage of their journey.

Why is the EC unable to do its due diligence?



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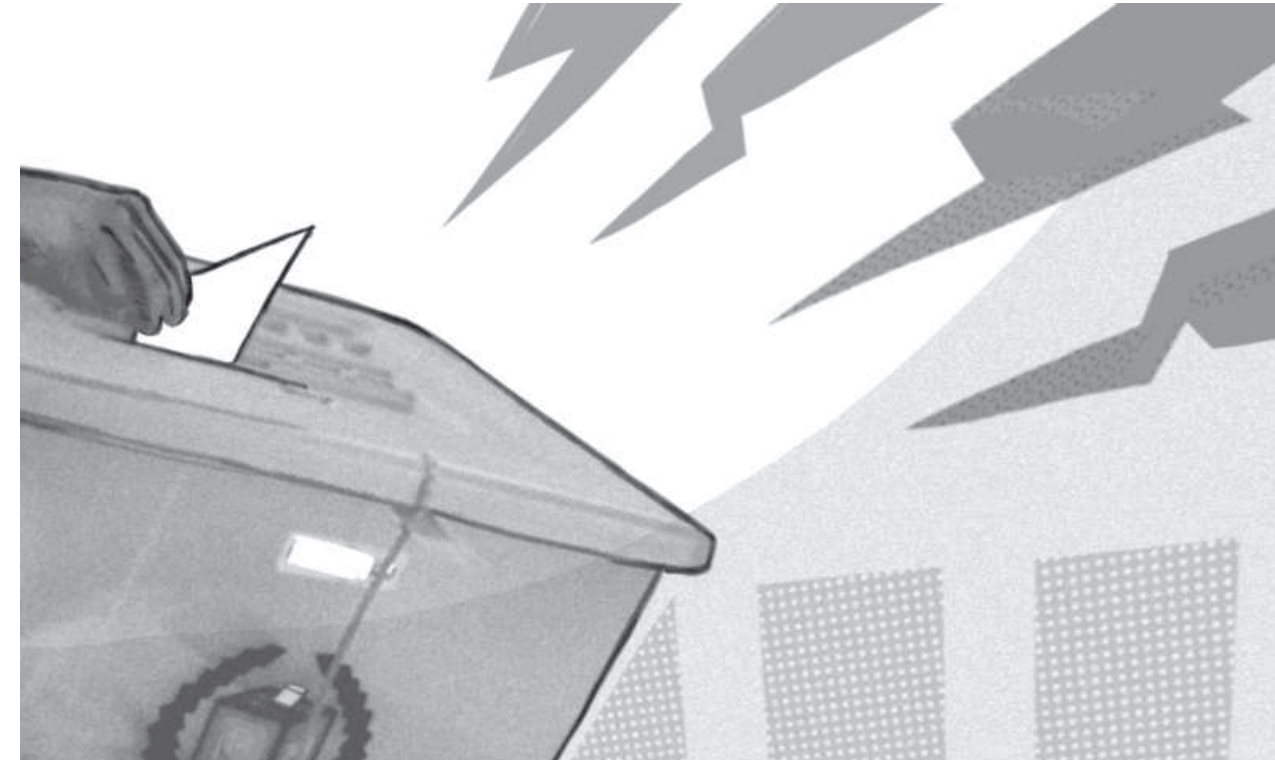
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By now, most of us know the term “*gayebi mamla*” which is used to describe fake or fictitious cases filed against opposition activists, including leading politicians. For nearly a decade, police have been using this tactic to deter activists taking part in anti-government politics by lodging false cases for incidents of violence, use of explosives, and so on. Subsequent media investigation usually reveals that no such incident ever took place at the given date, time, and place. There are a number of reported cases in which the accused included people who died years ago, or were living in another country when the alleged incident happened.

Now, our Election Commission seems to be following a similar path. It has selected some organisations for the purpose of election observation which exist only on paper. A recent investigation by *Prothom Alo* has revealed that a number of those organisations stopped functioning years ago. Its investigation into 32 out of the 68 organisations selected by the EC as being fit for poll monitoring found that seven of them exist only on paper. Moreover, members of the board of directors or their close relatives in at least 10 other organisations reportedly have political affiliations.

Earlier, on July 27, Bangla daily *Jugantor* reported that on the list of 94 organisations prepared by the EC for election monitoring, there were many that were floated and led by political activists. The recently published primary list of 68 selections suggests that many of the 94 “political monitors” have been dropped. But latest reports also prove that the screening process has largely failed. Investigations by the media found that most of these organisations do not have adequate human resources, thereby raising questions about their ability of conducting impartial monitoring of the national polls.

According to *Prothom Alo*, Seba Social Foundation of Laxmipur district has been selected as an



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

election monitor despite the fact that its lone functionary, executive director Jashim Uddin Ripon, has been living in Saudi Arabia for five years, and the organisation has been dormant for just as long. It is even more intriguing to know that the local police had reported all this to the EC following their inquiry, but their finding seems to have been overlooked.

One may recall the EC's largely discredited meeting with a group of so-called multinational observers brought in by the now-disqualified Election Monitoring Forum (EMF), which was apparently set up by the close associates of some politicians belonging to the ruling party. Responding to the controversies, Election Commissioner Md Alamgir told the media on August 2 that, as the EC didn't have offices overseas, it was not possible for them to detect the inauthenticity of the foreign observers.

EC Alamgir's clarification,

however, falls far short of being convincing, as their primary responsibility was to ascertain the locus standi of the foreign observers in order to bring them in. Besides, the EC should have known that the EMF didn't have any recognition as an observer group. Sure, the chief of the EMF had earlier represented a separate organisation called the

the EC's approval despite the media's field-level investigations finding that both of these suddenly created parties do not fulfil the required conditionalities, including having a minimum grassroots organisation and appropriate party offices or headquarters. Why have these media reports been largely ignored? Certain quarters' interests in

Saarc Human Rights Foundation (SHRF). But the SHRF's tenure as a poll observer, too, expired last May after five years. The EC's attempt to justify its lack of due diligence in dealing with the issue of poll observation is simply shocking. It even failed to express any regret for wasting the valuable hours of the Commission and its resources, however little that may have been. Interestingly, the EC does not deserve much credit for the removal of the EMF, as the lone member organisation of this forum, Bibi Asiya Foundation, has succeeded in securing a place in the new list of election observers.

It is not only the issue of dealing with election observers that has caused controversy. The registration of political parties, too, has given rise to serious questions about the EC's fairness and motivations. The two previously unknown political parties – Bangladesh Nationalist Movement (BNM) and Bangladesh Supreme Party (BSP) – have received

propping up these two parties are quite evident, as people familiar with their activities have suggested that fresh initiatives are in full steam to attract leaders and activists from BNP – people who have been sidelined in the party for some time – to the new parties. There are widespread speculations that in the case of a BNP boycott in the upcoming parliamentary election, one of these two parties will get all the support required to replace BNP and make the contest a “participatory” one.

Ignoring evidence appearing in the media runs contrary to the legal requirements in terms of both the registration of political parties and selecting impartial and genuine election observers. And this indicates a disturbing trend. These deviations not only erode the EC's credibility but also strengthen their critics' argument that the Commission has neither independence nor the ability to fulfil its obligations with due diligence.

FAMILY PLANNING IN BANGLADESH

Despite progress, there are miles to go



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In 2012, the London Summit on Family Planning marked a significant turning point in the global family planning movement and its progress towards achieving universal access to family planning services. This collaborative summit brought together key stakeholders and partners dedicated to advancing family planning initiatives. As a result, the Family Planning 2020 (FP2020) partnership was established, setting an ambitious agenda to improve access to voluntary family planning information and services worldwide.

One of the main objectives within the FP2020 framework was to empower an additional 120 million women across 69 countries, including Bangladesh, to adopt modern contraceptives by 2020. Bangladesh made several commitments aligned with this goal, such as increasing access and usage of family planning services to 80 percent, with a specific focus on reaching 60 percent in low-performing areas, by 2021. Other targets included increasing the utilisation of long-acting and permanent methods to 30 percent, reducing unmet need for contraception to seven percent and reducing contraceptive methods' discontinuation rate to 20 percent. Bangladesh aimed to extend

effective family planning services to approximately 39.4 million couples by 2021. However, the country has made minimal progress in all of these targets, making the provision of contraception a major challenge for Bangladeshis.

According to the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) 2022, 64 percent of currently married women utilise contraception, with 55 percent opting for modern contraceptive methods. This is significant in terms of actual numbers, as it means that approximately 4.5 million couples started using modern contraception over the FP2020 initiative period. When combined with the estimated 17.75 million contraception users in 2011, the current estimate suggests that approximately 22.30 million couples are now using modern contraception. Although this falls short of Bangladesh's commitment to providing contraception for 39.4 million couples under the FP2020 initiative, it is important to acknowledge that the use of modern contraception has prevented a significant number of unintended pregnancies, abortions, and maternal deaths.

But targets to reduce geographic disparities and inequality achieved

minimal success. For instance, the usage of contraception among poorer and poorest women increased from nearly 53 percent and 54 percent in 2011 to approximately 61 percent and 57 percent, respectively, by 2022. Interestingly, these percentages surpass those of the advantaged group. Nevertheless, there has been limited progress in increasing modern contraception usage among disadvantaged groups, such as the slum or floating populations. To note, the urban-rural disparity in modern contraception usage has slightly decreased from 2.6 percentage points in 2011 to 1.2 percentage points in 2022. But regional disparities of modern contraception use are still very high, with approximately 17 percentage points between Rajshahi (61 percent) and Sylhet (44 percent) regions reported in 2022. The contraception discontinuation rate was still very high at approximately 30 percent in 2022, instead of the targeted 20 percent by 2021. These failures contribute to the stagnation of contraception use in Bangladesh, underscoring the need for renewed efforts to address gaps, reduce disparities, and improve access to comprehensive family planning services.

In 2022, Bangladesh made another significant commitment to ensuring rights-based family planning with the FP2030 initiative. A key principle of FP2030 is that family planning should be provided in a manner that respects individuals' rights. This includes granting women and girls the autonomy to make decisions regarding their own bodies and reproductive health, and ensuring access to family planning services without discrimination or coercion.

However, achieving this objective in Bangladesh poses significant challenges.

Existing community norms still consider contraception as primarily the responsibility of women, rather than the shared responsibility of a couple. This results in the marginalisation of women's choices, which is evident in national-level estimates, where only 10 percent of the 55 percent of modern contraceptive method users are men, and a mere 2.6 percent of the 7.5 percent of long-acting and permanent contraceptive method users are men. Government initiatives aimed at involving men in formal family planning services have faced limited success thus far. The country also faces a high burden of unintended and short interval pregnancies, with a prevalence of approximately 25 percent. However, a significant portion of these pregnancies are wanted from the husband's perspective, indicating evidence of reproductive coercion.

Addressing these challenges requires increased effectiveness of government-level initiatives at the lowest levels. However, the real scenario is contrary to this, with a declining number of family planning visits and exposure to awareness messages. Private sources are steadily becoming the dominant source of contraception information. The public sector now provides only 37 percent of modern contraception, down from 44 percent in 2011. Such challenges make access to rights-based family planning services difficult for a specific group of Bangladeshi women, who cannot access contraception of their choice due to financial or other restrictions or can only use contraception as per their partners' desires.