

Break the cycle of pre-election violence

Ruling party must discourage violent confrontations

With a national election only a few months away, it is expected that the country's political atmosphere would heat up, that barbed remarks would be exchanged between political rivals. But what we neither expect, nor want, yet are forced to watch, are violent tactics to intimidate opposition parties as they take to the streets to convey their demands to the government. Sadly, such violent engagement has become an inseparable part of our electoral culture, despite repeated calls for dialogues and negotiations to resolve political differences. We saw the latest episode of such violence on Sunday, when BNP men on their way to a road march were intercepted and assaulted, and their vehicles vandalised.

According to media reports, several vehicles carrying members of Chhatra Dal and Swechhasebak Dal were attacked at three different locations on the Natore-Bogura highway. In one of those incidents, a number of Chhatra Dal activists were beaten and hacked indiscriminately, and the microbus carrying them was set on fire, according to witnesses and local BNP workers. *Prothom Alo* reported that three activists were admitted to the Rajshahi Medical College Hospital due to critical injuries. BNP has alleged that Awami League was behind the attack, which the latter has refuted. Local police and firefighters could not clarify the matter, even though there is a photo showing a local AL leader searching a vehicle earlier on Sunday morning, per our report.

We are familiar with this pattern, however. Since BNP started to hold demonstrations to push their agenda in the run-up to the upcoming general election, we have witnessed how their street programmes were routinely intercepted by ruling party men, mostly ending up in violent clashes, sometimes with the involvement of the law enforcement itself. This is totally unacceptable. We condemn these attacks on the BNP for exercising its constitutional right to hold demonstrations.

That said, we also urge political leaders across the aisle to put more efforts into finding a way to engage and negotiate with each other. It's time they broke the cycle of violence and took up the path of dialogue, instead of trying to force their way through street mobilisations. The uncompromising attitudes of major political parties are jeopardising any chance of having a free and fair election. All parties must come together to find a middle ground to overcome the ongoing political stalemate.

CDA must answer for incompetence

Its unplanned and ineffective undertakings are making Chattogram unliveable

The continued public sufferings caused by the unplanned development activities of the Chattogram Development Authority (CDA) are quite unacceptable. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, the state-run organisation has not only failed to play the role expected of it, but also plunged the city in a mess with its inefficient handling of projects. The CDA's primary responsibility was to plan and implement housing projects for residents as well as prevent unplanned urbanisation, something that it failed to do. Instead, over the years, it has overextended its mandate by focusing on various infrastructure development projects such as drainage development, building flyovers and elevated expressways, constructing flats, etc. – which was not even its job in the first place. The question is, why did the CDA forget its roles and responsibilities?

For instance, the Chittagong City Corporation (CCC) used to deal with the city's waterlogging problem before the CDA, six years ago, took over this task. It was partly because of its lack of experience in this regard that a megaproject it undertook in 2017 to prevent waterlogging – spending Tk 5,790 crore – failed to make an impact. In fact, waterlogging took a severe turn this monsoon, submerging the city at least 12 times following heavy rains and tidal water. Moreover, none of the 25 projects undertaken by the CDA over the last 15 years could be completed on time, which eventually multiplied the costs of the projects. Moreover, it reportedly cut down 16 hills to construct a link road through the city, and also did not pay heed to the suggestion of transport experts not to build unnecessary flyovers in Chattogram. There are many such allegations against this organisation that demonstrate its chronic failure to discharge its duties properly.

Evidently, the CDA has done more damage than good to the health of the port city – at massive costs to taxpayers. It is time the higher authorities held it accountable by making its management answer for their incompetence and failures. Otherwise, making Chattogram a liveable city will remain a far-fetched dream.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The perils of overprotective parenting

Helicopter parenting, a term coined to characterise parents' constant presence in their children's life, has become all too common. Our children require space to develop, make errors, and learn from them. We deny children the opportunity to develop independence and resilience when we constantly hover over them. Furthermore, helicopter parenting can cause stress for both parents and children. Parents must strike a balance between being protective and allowing their children to experience the world freely. In a world where adaptation and problem-solving abilities are required, we should raise children who are self-assured and capable of making decisions.

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The media must do more to protest CSA



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The timing of the Cyber Security Act, in the run-up to the elections, was hardly surprising. Oddly enough, it fits a strange pattern that goes back 20 years. Before delving into a discussion around this new menace against press freedom, let us explore this pattern.

The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulation Act, 2001 intended to control the communications infrastructure, providing sweeping powers to the government. This law allowed the government to tap any phone or track its location for as long as it wanted, based on its suspicions. The law was enacted a few months before a national election.

When the outgoing BNP regime enacted the ICT act in 2006, as one of its last acts in office, it was most likely to provide what it hoped would be a puppet caretaker government with an instrument to apprehend undesirable elements. For all intents and purposes, at least as far as BNP was concerned, the election was all but won with a malleable president duly installed to head the caretaker government. That government fell apart, some would say specifically because the president was overly malleable.

The ICT act set a precedent for the government of the day to control online content and criminalise free expression of thoughts. Its rather nebulous Section 57 strived to define an offence but left much to interpretation, basically allowing the government to criminalise online content at its discretion.

The following Awami League government amended that act in 2013, in the run-up to the 2014 election, and turned it into an even more potent weapon to clamp down on dissent. The amendment allowed the government to make arrests without warrant and made cases under certain sections, including Section 57, non-bailable. In the aftermath, Section 57 gained much notoriety and went on to inspire a level of fear that could only be compared to that of the infamous Section 144 from the Pakistan (Language Movement?) period.

The ICT Act was retired to be replaced by the more potent Digital Security Act. Very similar to BNP's ICT Act, the DSA was passed during the last days of the Awami League government in office in 2018, just before the election and without much discussion in parliament or outside. The DSA allowed arrests without a warrant solely

on the basis of suspicion. Evidently intent on criminalising expression and controlling online content, or rather dissent, the DSA's widespread use saw much criticism within the media.

More recently, and yet again leading up to another general election, the Cyber Security Act is set to replace the DSA with nominal concessions, essentially remaining the same beast as its predecessor but with the added potential to be used against whistleblowers.

The consistent pattern of introducing these laws in the run-up to elections suggests that this phenomenon is not merely



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coincidental. It also suggests that successive regimes have enacted such laws at a critical juncture, most likely to be able to use them, or abuse them, over the impending uncertainty that elections bring about.

However, another pattern, or the lack thereof, emerges from a cursory perusal of periodicals and newspapers. Editors and journalists have held meetings and discussions every time these laws were passed. Citizens, civil society groups, and activists have held rallies and demonstrations against these acts of legislation. These laws are often the centre of discussion when a certain extreme instance of abuse comes to light and duly makes it to the headlines over several days. But there has not been any sustained campaign

the full details of a story to keep from being sued under the provisions of this law would carry this seal. This would serve two purposes. First, it would keep this issue alive and readers would be reminded that the news industry lives under the spectre of a law that threatens and criminalises free speech. It would keep the campaign alive for months, if not years. It would also put on record the number of stories that are affected by the law. Second, a "CSA seal" would indicate to the reader that the news outlet in question is admitting to its readers that it is not being able to be fully transparent, so far as a particular story is concerned. As opposed to a seal of quality, this seal would indicate the contrary: that the story is not complete, thus increasing

vitriol. It used to be that initial interest in such commentary would wane and readers would flock back to traditional journalistic platforms. It used to be that the alternatives would be clear: one being a source of authentic, meaningful, and balanced reporting and another offering a skewed point-of-view. But this is not possible anymore, thanks to the climate of self-censorship and fear. Hence, readers do not have the benefit of a convincingly better alternative. It is becoming increasingly imperative for legacy outlets to find avenues to tell readers that they are being as responsible and truthful as possible. It is imperative that news outlets subject themselves to ever stronger, more exacting standards of journalism in order to remain credible.

Rising tides, sinking chalkboards



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One issue that often gets drowned out in the cacophony of discussions surrounding climate change is how the crisis is affecting our children and their education. According to Save the Children and Unicef, children are among the most affected by extreme weather events – like tidal surges, cyclones, flooding and desertification – all caused by climate change. Approximately 20 million Bangladeshi children are already significantly exposed to climate threats, and 12 million kids who live near and along river systems face the increased risk of fatal flooding. And strong cyclones frequently affect another 4.5 million children living in the coastal region.

Climate change affects children and their education through several channels. First, economic challenges due to climate-related impacts may force families to prioritise immediate needs over educational expenses, lowering school enrolment rates. This feeds the cycle of inequality and constrained opportunity. Child labour may also go up due to climate change-induced poverty, as nearly half of the

labouring population is dependent on the climate-sensitive agriculture sector.

Second, both children and teachers will be exposed to illnesses such as malaria, typhoid, dengue fever and water-borne infections, which would further disrupt educational plans. Research shows that 58 percent of human infectious diseases may be aggravated due to climate change. Furthermore, students will frequently get sick during school assemblies or in the middle of class due to heatwaves. The changing climate negatively affects the hygiene of students as well, amid a prevalent shortage of sanitation facilities. Further damage to the facilities and scarcity of water will especially worsen attendance rate and academic performance of girls.

Climate change may have a negative effect on children's emotional well-being too. The lack of a sense of security arising from increased disasters will hamper cognition and motivation to learn. According to a Unicef report, 70 percent of respondents were anxious about climate change and

its repercussions for the future. This crisis will also give rise to gender-based violence, domestic violence, sexual abuse and trauma, which in turn will create deep scars on the mental health of children.

Extreme weather phenomena like floods, cyclones, and storms could disrupt school operations, damage infrastructure, and cause displacement of students and teachers. All this would lead to interrupted learning and decreased attendance. A total of 25,430 educational institutions are situated in disaster-prone areas, according to Bangladesh Education Statistics. According to a survey conducted in 2019, 19.49 percent of institutions, after the most recent disaster, were unable to recover from the loss of buildings, 18.78 percent from the loss of furniture, 18.09 percent from the loss of doors and windows, 12.86 percent from the loss of sanitation facilities, and 11.56 percent from the loss of connecting roads.

Disruption to roads and communication systems caused by severe weather events leads to a detrimental effect on schooling. According to the Bangladesh Disaster-related Statistics 2021, 369,865 children missed school at different times due to disasters during 2015-20. Among them, 56.60 percent did so due to disruption of communication systems and 24.17 percent because of damage to school infrastructure.

Extreme weather like high temperatures will also hinder outdoor enjoyment, sports, and school

assemblies. Consequently, students will miss out on a variety of school-based collective and community learning opportunities.

Adapting schooling to climate change requires a multifaceted approach that considers both the immediate challenges and long-term impacts of shifting climate patterns. Strategies such as climate-resilient infrastructure, digital learning resources, community-based education, early warning systems, teacher training, raising awareness, conducting disaster preparedness drills, and long-term planning will bear fruit.

The effects of disasters and changing climate must be taken into account while choosing school designs. "Climate-smart interventions" need to be put in place, to achieve energy efficiency, water safety and food security. In this context, collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, international organisations, and local communities holds immense importance.

As we stand at the crossroads of the climate crisis, Bangladesh must act swiftly to safeguard its primary education system. The resilience of a nation lies not only in its ability to withstand environmental challenges but also in its capacity to nurture the minds of its youth. By prioritising a climate-resilient education system, Bangladesh can set the stage for a brighter and more sustainable future for its children and generations to come.