

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Dialogue is not optional, it's a must

Without compromise, there is no democratic way to resolve current stalemate

Politicians are nothing if not masters of the elusive art of compromise. When a crisis ensues in a nation's life, it falls on the politicians to negotiate a solution and execute it. If it has something to do with the politicians themselves, they can reach across the aisle and iron out their differences. They can bicker publicly but bond privately, and that has always served nations. So what's really stopping Awami League and BNP from taking even baby steps towards that all-too-important compromise over the next election, despite the catastrophic consequences that likely await the nation should they fail to do so?

According to a report by this daily, while meeting a pre-election assessment team of the US on Monday, both parties held steadfastly to their positions. Awami League has said that no compromise can be worked out with BNP in violation of the constitution, while BNP has said that a fair election is only possible under a neutral administration. There have been accusations and counteraccusations as well, with the former alleging that BNP has "blocked the space" for any compromise, and the latter alleging that the ruling party has "institutionalised" vote rigging and thus must resign before election.

It is clear that mistrust still runs deep between the two parties, and neither is willing to take the first step towards reconciliation. A fair election – which both Awami League and BNP want – requires having the right system in place and the right environment for holding it – which both parties also agree on, at least theoretically. Where things get sticky is finding the right way to go about it. Given their diametrically opposite views on this matter, we must ask: is there a middle ground where the concerns of both can be addressed and accommodated – ensuring neutrality of the election-time government by limiting partisan influences in election-related affairs but without compromising the spirit of the constitution? Can each budge a little from their position so that both can come closer to a working understanding?

After all, what is more important – party interests or public interests? Both parties should understand that their intransigence is only hurting the nation, with an already battered economy likely to bleed more if the uncertainty is prolonged. The threat to lives should also not be discounted if violence erupts. For the greater good of the nation, it is imperative that both parties engage in dialogues immediately and try to find a common ground from which they can work on finding a workable solution.

Is a catastrophic war looming?

World must come together to prevent the humanitarian crisis facing Gaza

We are deeply worried about the escalating tensions between Israel and Palestine as the former has imposed a total siege on the Gaza Strip, cut off electricity, food, fuel and water supplies, and kept bombing targets in the Palestinian enclave in response to Hamas' recent attacks on Israel. While the Israeli media reported that Hamas fighters killed about 900 people inside Israel during the attacks, according to Gaza's health ministry, at least 770 Palestinians have been killed and 4,000 wounded by Israeli airstrikes so far.

What is further worrying is that Israel is now planning a ground assault to defeat Hamas and liberate the hostages held by it. Israel has already begun gathering weapons and troops on the Gaza border for a ground operation, while President Netanyahu has warned Gaza civilians to get away from all Hamas sites, which he vowed to turn "to rubble". All this means that a major humanitarian crisis will soon unfold in Gaza, if the international community fails to intervene for a ceasefire.

But it is alarming to see the responses so far by the international community, particularly the US – Israel's key ally – and other Western countries. While they are condemning the violence carried out by Hamas, they are shamefully silent on Israel's plan to go on a war. The US has already pledged its "rock solid" support for Israel, and as part of it, started sending weapons and warships to the country. Meanwhile, the EU halted development aid payments to the Palestinians and said it was placing 691 million euros (\$728 million) of support "under review", which is shocking.

It is well known that the current situation is partly a result of the dire socioeconomic situation in the besieged Gaza Strip. Israel has been regularly attacking the occupied West Bank and Palestinian citizens of Israel. But we have not seen the West raise concern about this. It is through their indifference or indulgence that the situation has come to this point. We hope they will take a strong stance now with a catastrophic war looming on the horizon. The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has said that he was "deeply distressed" by the siege announcement. We hope that the UN, as well as other countries, will raise their voice for a ceasefire so that the humanitarian crisis facing Gaza can be prevented.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dhaka's traffic problem

Traffic mismanagement in Dhaka city is just getting worse every day, especially at key intersections of Nilkhet, Shahbagh, Farmgate, Panthapath areas. The traffic police are not performing their duty properly. Moreover, due to the lack of sufficient overbridges, the movement of pedestrians is being obstructed, and unexpected accidents are happening frequently. Therefore, I am drawing attention to this issue to find a solution to this chaos. The authorities must take swift action to ensure proper traffic management, and provide relief to drivers and pedestrians.

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What may an education manifesto for 2024 look like?



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MANZOOR AHMED

Eyeing the upcoming 12th parliamentary election in January 2024, the Awami League, the ruling party since 2009, has formed an election manifesto preparation sub-committee. Abdur Razzaque, member of the party presidium and agriculture minister, has been assigned by party chief Sheikh Hasina to head the sub-committee. A political manifesto ahead of a national election is a party's pledge about their goals and priorities regarding major sectors of national development, aimed at persuading citizens to vote them into power. The party, in turn, has the obligation to fulfil the pledge it makes to the people.

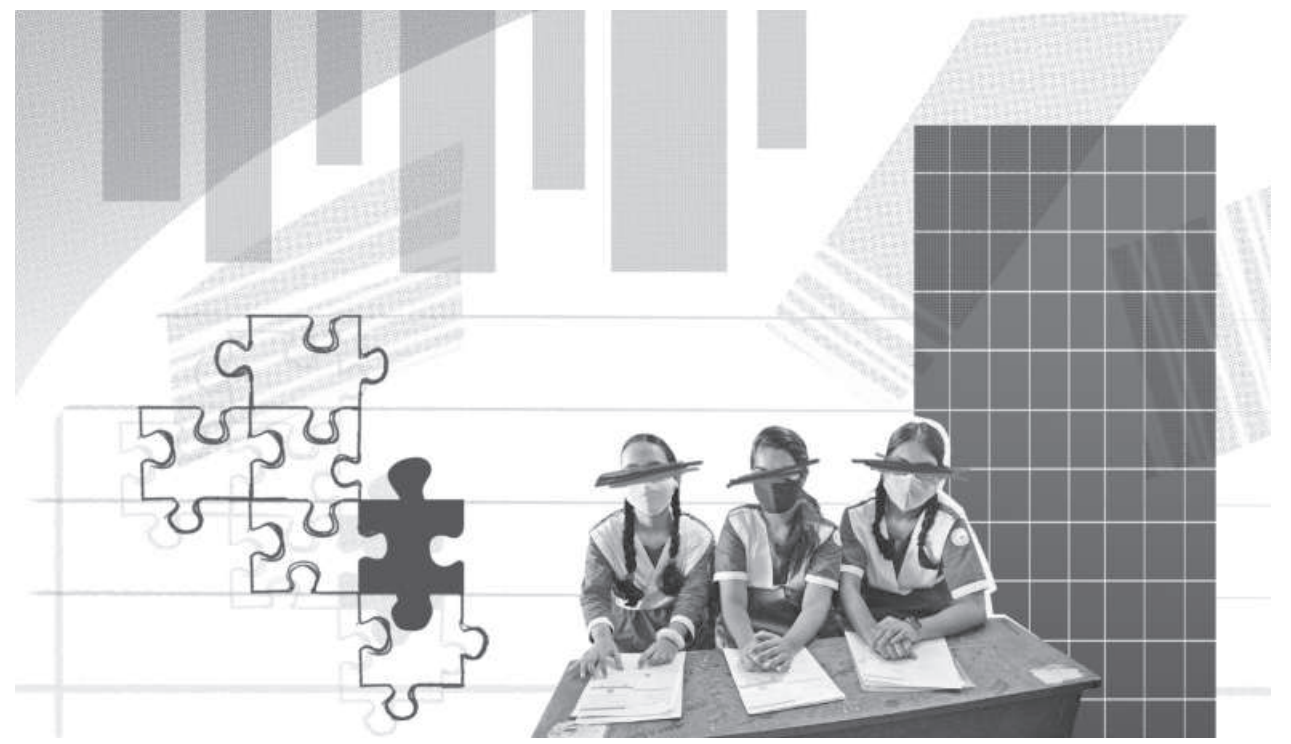
What may be the education component of the 2024 manifesto? In 2018, ahead of the 11th parliamentary election, the Awami League manifesto titled "Bangladesh marches towards prosperity" stated its promises on education. Listing first the "immense success" achieved in the previous five years, the goals and plans for the next five years were mentioned.

The success list included the adoption of the National Education Policy 2010, nationalisation of 26,000 community-built primary schools, millions of free textbooks distributed to students, appointment of new teachers, and construction of various educational institutions. Declaring the Dawra-e-Taklim of the Qawmi madrasas as equivalent to a general master's degree was also mentioned as a success.

The objectives and plans for the next five years (2019-23) included giving highest allocations for education and proper use of the fund, a "large project" for training language and mathematics teachers of primary and secondary schools, making Bangladesh "totally free from the curse of illiteracy," bringing dropout rates in primary school down to zero and to five percent up to Class 8, making school meal universal in rural and low-income urban areas, and continuation of the stipends for students. Also, it was planned that the salary structure of primary school teachers would be "dealt [with] judiciously."

It can be seen readily that the achievements listed for past years were essentially to keep the existing system running and expanding it somewhat. This was a necessary objective, but this did not address the major quality and disparity problems of our education system.

In the plan for the following five years, a recognition of the quality, learning outcome and inequality issues could be detected. However, it is well-known that little progress has been made in the first five objectives listed. The allocations for education did not increase as a proportion of GDP or the national budget, and better utilisation of funds remained questionable. A "large project" for language and mathematics teachers did not happen, and no improvement could be seen in students acquiring foundational skills. We are still far from getting rid of illiteracy or bringing dropout rates



COLLAGE: REHNUMA PROSHOON

to zero or near-zero at primary and secondary levels, though slow progress has been reported. School feeding ceased during the Covid closure, and the project funding ended. It is yet to be taken up as a regular budget activity of the government.

A review of activities under the 2018 manifesto has been posted by Mohammad Tofazzel Hossain Miah, principal secretary at the Prime Minister's Office, on the PMO website. This step to inform the public is commendable. Incidentally, in his official CV, among other academic accomplishments, Miah has mentioned

realising its own goal of reaching the higher-middle-income rank by 2030 and the developed country status by 2041. A plan does not exist for universal secondary education. A serious and systematic effort has not been made to implement the key objectives of the much invoked 2010 National Education Policy.

Will the new manifesto under preparation again be a triumphal narrative of great success, citing the expansion of the system, and the promise to continue the good work that has been going on? Such an exercise cannot be satisfactory and cannot serve

With the foundations laid for Digital Bangladesh, the new buzzword now is "Smart Bangladesh," which may very well figure prominently in a new manifesto. Smart Bangladesh can be real only with smart people, especially a smart new generation, raised through an effective education system.

The education manifesto needs to recognise both the challenges and the opportunities. Those who assume power, chosen by citizens freely and fairly in January 2014, will do well to pay attention to the ongoing education discourse and involve the stakeholders in laying the path for the future.

Smart Bangladesh, unsmart cybersecurity measures



A CLOSER LOOK

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TASNEEM TAYEB

With consistently poor data security and the resultant surge in cyberattacks in recent years, Bangladesh faces major cybersecurity challenges. The latest case of cybersecurity vulnerability was the leakage of sensitive personal data of individuals who have the smart National Identity (NID) cards on a Telegram channel.

While the NID database contains personal information of more than 12 crore voters, 5.5 crore of them have Smart NID cards. The custodian of the NID system, the Election Commission (EC), has tried to wash its hands off the issue saying that the data breach occurred through one or some of the 174 institutions and organisations that have access to the NID server. But the fact remains that the EC is sharing sensitive personal data of citizens with various bodies that are not capable of ensuring their web security and integrity, resulting in this leakage.

Earlier in June this year, US-based online publisher of start-up and technology industry news TechCrunch revealed that the personal data of more

than five crore Bangladeshi citizens had been exfiltrated and exposed from the website of the Office of the Registrar General, Birth and Death Registration (BDRIS). The exposed data included full names of the victims, their phone numbers, email addresses and NID numbers.

In the recent case, the entire profile of an individual could be obtained from the Telegram channel by just providing two inputs: the NID number and the date of birth.

The Telegram channel leakage raises questions about the integrity of the EC, which provides sensitive personal data of individuals to organisations with little ability to keep them secure. The BDRIS issue should have been a good enough red flag for the NID data custodian to limit access to information for high-risk organisations, like they have done after the Telegram issue surfaced.

What is even more concerning is that, despite identifying BDRIS as a source of data pilferage, no punishable action has yet been recommended

against them by the investigating body, and the ICT Division closed the loop saying, "It is not acceptable that personal information of five million people was open to all. However, we cannot deny the claim either."

In other countries, such cases are not treated lightly, and responsible organisations are at least made accountable for their failure with penalties. For instance, the Integrated Health Information System of Singapore, in 2019, was fined \$750,000 (around Tk 8 crore) for the incident of pilferage of personal data of its patients. Penalising organisations for such a breach is not about playing the blame game; rather, it is a negative reinforcement, holding them accountable for their negligence and making sure that they are more careful in the future. A simple slap on the wrist – as in the case of BDRIS – only goes to show how lightly this issue is being treated by the authorities here.

The problem with these data breaches means sensitive personal data of the citizens are now exposed – once data is leaked, even if it is taken down from public domain later, it is likely to remain with those nefarious bodies that have downloaded them – and this makes them even more vulnerable to crimes such as identity theft. Personal data could easily be manipulated by criminal groups to carry out fraudulent and criminal activities. What guarantee is there that your and my complete personal

profiles are not lying at the disposal of some criminal gang – may be even in a far away, obscure location – for them to exploit and use at their will? And with the general election almost knocking at the door, what guarantee is there that criminals would not leverage these leaked data to manipulate the election results via identity theft?

We are moving towards Vision 2041 at a fast pace to become "Smart Bangladesh." As we move towards this grand vision, launch digital banking to bring the masses under the formal financial umbrella, increasingly leverage Internet of Things (IoT) for easier data exchange and to make life better, bridge the digital divide through digital innovation and sustainable solutions, and embrace 4IR, we are no longer in a position where we can wash our hands off responsibility by pointing fingers at others.

The Bangladesh Government's Computer Incident Response Team (BGD e-GOV CIRT), along with the cybercrime investigation team under the police's Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit and other agencies involved with combating cyberthreats, should be empowered with enhanced knowledge and adequate tools so that they are better capable of averting such risks and threats going forward. Since we are prioritising a smart future, we must also put in place adequate digital infrastructure to keep us safe in the smart world.