

Welcome expansion in labour export

But protecting migrant workers' rights is equally important

It is encouraging to learn that Bangladesh's labour market is expanding beyond the Gulf and Southeast Asian countries. According to a report by this daily, our workers are now increasingly migrating to other destinations such as South Korea, Italy and Japan. That said, Saudi Arabia still remains the biggest employer of Bangladeshi labour force, with 54 percent of migrant workers going to the country in 2022. After Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Singapore, Malaysia, Qatar and Kuwait are among other top employers. However, South Korea has now emerged as a promising destination, having recruited some 9,170 workers between January 2022 and June 2023.

In addition, Japan, Italy and Seychelles are also increasingly attracting migrants. While Italy lifted an eight-year embargo on hiring workers from Bangladesh in October 2020, Japan recently made arrangements with Bangladesh to recruit new workers. Seychelles, on the other hand, is also recruiting workers after an agreement on labour cooperation in 2019.

The expansion beyond the Gulf has been long overdue because Middle Eastern countries mostly recruit unskilled or low-skilled workers from Bangladesh, who receive a lower salary compared to skilled workers from the Philippines, India or China. This is also one of the reasons for our declining remittance inflow, even though we have been sending an increasing number of workers to these countries. Moreover, our workers are often exposed to violence and abuse in the Gulf countries. A staggering number of them, including female workers, died in these countries having faced appalling living and working conditions as well as abuse by employers. Therefore, it is crucial that we reduce our overdependence on Gulf countries and find alternative destinations.

Although the number of workers sent to the emerging destinations is still very low, we hope that it will continue to rise, and the addition of skilled labour should also create a competitive and conducive environment in the labour-receiving countries. This will also increase our bargaining capacity as a labour-sending country, and in turn help our workers get better salaries as well as protection from abuse. Right now, the priority is to keep up the momentum. Meanwhile, the expatriate ministry should focus more on upskilling workers so that they can bring in better economic returns. Moreover, private recruiting agencies should also be involved in the process to increase outflow of workers and explore new markets for them.

SUVs for the sake of a fair election?

Govt must refrain from actions that can tarnish the election

It is disheartening to know that, despite concerns from independent analysts, a controversial move to buy 261 expensive cars (SUVs) for DCs and UNOs has been principally approved by the cabinet committee on economic affairs. As we said when it was reported last month that the finance ministry had greenlit the proposal, the Tk-381-crore procurement initiative will only add to the strain on public coffers at a time of record-high import bills and critically low forex reserves. Moreover, the latest development hasn't been announced properly, possibly fearing backlash, despite the finance ministry earlier declaring that it would hold a press briefing.

It goes without saying that the public has a right to know the reason for such purchases using their hard-earned money. Although the finance minister did attempt a justification – that “there was already a need to buy the cars. Moreover, cars are really needed during elections, and they are needed for conducting fair elections” – we are unconvinced that this is the case. The DCs and UNOs usually serve as returning officers and assistant returning officers, respectively, during elections. In any constituency, everything related to polling basically goes through them. Thus, the latest move, coming just months ahead of a scheduled general election, has ignited fears that it was meant to please these officials and potentially impact the election outcome.

If this is the case, then we have every reason to be worried. In the past weeks, we have seen similar, strategically timed provisions in the form of perks and promotions for public officials holding important positions. We have seen how demands for in-situ promotions were indulged in both public administration and BCS police cadres. While we recognise the importance of deserving officials getting what they are due, those must be a means to a greater end: public interests. And right now, the public is not best served by such initiatives. SUVs don't help in elections. If a fair election is indeed what the government wants, it must ensure neutrality of election officials and transparency in the electoral process.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Issues in new school curriculum

The new school curriculum has introduced a six-monthly evaluation system for sixth and seventh grades. This method prioritises student learning assessment, but it raises concerns about the persistence of competitive education in our culture and the potential for economic bias, given the rising cost of educational materials. Moreover, without proper oversight and clear assessment guidelines, some teachers may use this system to favour students they tutor privately. Therefore, I urge the education ministry to consider these issues and develop a comprehensive implementation plan for this new system.

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Feni

Poisoned rhetoric and public concerns



THE THIRD VIEW

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MAHFUZ ANAM

We have said this before, but elections are a time when people get the chance to express their will as to which party and which leaders will govern them. But in our case, it is the cacophony of two leading political parties that will be assaulting our eardrums. Awami League's wish for election under Sheikh Hasina and BNP's wish for the very opposite are all we have heard of in the past months, if not years.

There has been no well-researched, in-depth and fact-based criticism of the government's performance by the BNP. Why there has been no analysis of the ministries or the government's performance escapes our comprehension. All we have seen is a sweeping demand for this government to quit. From the other side, no elaborate explanation has been given as to why legal ways cannot be found to respond to BNP's demands, except that “we won't go outside the constitution.”

With only a few months left till the election, we still have no idea what AL's and BNP's manifestos will reveal – though what they say and what they end up doing are usually miles apart. We know of no effort from either side to engage with the public in any way and inquire what the people's wishes and concerns are.

There have been no open surveys, opinion polls or any big or small group discussions that we know of. How, then, will the leaders on both sides learn what the real issues are? If asked what they are doing to gauge the priorities and concerns of the people, they will most likely say, and with supreme certainty, “We don't discuss with the people because we do not need to. We are with them all the time, we know everything about their aspirations as we are always and tirelessly working for them. It is you people – the media, NGOs, intellectuals, civil society, etc – who do not know and therefore have to ask.”

Between BNP's “people want Hasina out” and AL's “people know who has brought about development,” our all-knowing political leaders seem to have no wish to get to the grassroots. *The Daily Star* used to run opinion polls in our earlier days, especially when power would change hands every five years and when neither party was entrenched enough to be authoritarian. But with the rise of complete intolerance and vindictiveness towards those who bring out the “bad news” regarding the rulers, we have long since given up.

Presently, BNP says that they will not participate in any election while the AL



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

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government is in power because they suspect that the incumbent will misuse the state machinery to manipulate the election. Awami League says they will not deviate from the constitution, which clearly allows the government to remain at the helm of affairs in an interim capacity. This is particularly ironic because back in the 1994-96 period, when BNP was in power, AL demanded for a caretaker system to hold elections because the then incumbent could not be trusted to hold free and fair elections, while BNP argued that they could not go “outside the constitution.” After 27 years, we are once again stuck on the same issue, only with the arguments being reversed between the same two sides.

This zero-sum game has locked Bangladesh in a deadly political stalemate, threatening all our achievements of the last 32 years.

Whatever economic gains we made stands threatened due to both international and domestic factors. Internationally, there is the Russia-Ukraine war, which has now been joined by the very fluid situation in the Middle East created by the latest Hamas attack and Israel's all-out war against the Palestinians. Our international trade is coming under strain, with both our exports and remittance inflow showing worrying signs of dipping. Internally, the falling forex reserves, the

simple question from our end is this: who is thinking of the economy, the people and the country? The answer, sadly, is “not them.”

Democracy was restored in Bangladesh in 1991. It was done through a civil movement by the combined opposition over a sustained period of time. Gen Ershad's government was toppled by a massive alliance led by Awami League and BNP, respectively. The public massively supported the opposition alliance because of the 19-point programme that they promised once victorious. None of the promises made during that time was honoured, and we gradually descended to a state of politics that can only be described as tribal.

Today, our politics is that of an election only being “free and fair” for the party that wins and being a fraudulent one according to the party that loses. No facts or evidence seem to be required. “Democracy prevails only if we are in power and absolutely nothing is acceptable if the other side is running the show” seems to be the go-to attitude. This is the myopic, narrow-minded, and self-centred worldview that AL and BNP harbour. In this “world” of theirs, there is no accommodation, no compromises, and no space for anything other than each side's view of the other.

I often wonder what it is in our

nature or our psyche that draws us to self-defeating inflexibility in our political posturing. For the last 32 years, as a part of *The Daily Star*, we have been a front row witness to the politics in Bangladesh. We have witnessed specifically the behaviour of our two leading parties. The one thing that both parties have retained in their behaviours is the firm refusal

to compromise on any issue, however justified a compromise may be. They continue to be insular to the political reality of the moment, in that their respective stance has no relation with the changing circumstances.

In our political world – as described above – the question that constantly runs through our minds is, given that both AL and BNP are only obsessed with their own interests, is there any space left on their plates for the people's interests? They are too greedy for power, too insulated against people's worries, too removed from the global realities, too unconcerned about the bigger picture, and too unmindful of the changes that are occurring all around us to have public interest high on their list of priorities. When the world is entering an era of artificial intelligence and examining the potential of quantum computers, we are still quarrelling over how to hold an election that will be acceptable to all. Sadly, we already know from past experience that even if we hold the most transparent and most well-conducted election in the world, the losing side will always reject it under one pretext or the other. Such is the irreconcilable nature of our politics. And it is what we are stuck with at a time when Bangladesh is termed one of the most vulnerable countries facing the biggest threat to civilisation: climate change.



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Habibul Awal has rightly said that law enforcement agencies will have to bear the responsibility if there is any communal violence before, during or after the upcoming election. He said this after a meeting with the Bangladesh Hindu-Buddha-Christian Oikya Parishad, where the organisation's general secretary asked that areas dominated by minorities be declared as “risky zones” during the election season and that security be amped up in these areas. It is sad but true that such misgivings are not ill-founded, as there have been incidents of communal violence surrounding elections in the past. This makes the CEC's statement all the more significant, who has also remarked that these concerns would be shared with the government, deputy commissioners and superintendents

of police, as well as the home ministry, to make sure minority communities are safe. But all this sounds nice only until we start to examine the realities on the ground.

In the last few years, attackers have targeted minority communities, and law enforcers have displayed apathy or reluctance in catching the culprits – who are often linked to influential groups. The fear of repercussions has prevented many victims from filing cases against their attackers. Even when cases have been filed, the likelihood of bringing the attackers to book has been slim. So, isn't it the law enforcers' job and moral obligation to investigate these incidents, arrest the suspects, and have them tried in court? Or is it their role to only please one particular party, because they may face harsh repercussions if they don't?

Let us not forget, moreover, that this

violence is not limited to attacks on minorities, but can erupt against any individual during elections, making the role of law enforcers critical in preventing it.

Till now, the police's role during most political events has been far from unbiased. The attacks on opposition members during rallies – in present times and in the past – where there was a strong presence of the police have proven the level of partiality in their actions. We have seen blatant camaraderie between law enforcers and members of Chhatra League, who unleashed their wrath on members of the opposition and on practically anyone who appeared to be critical of the ruling party. And, in most cases, police did not do anything to stop ruling party men from assaulting opposition members. Sometimes, innocent bystanders have had to pay the price during these clashes. Meanwhile, law enforcers have shown their alacrity in arresting opposition members and filing a preposterous number of cases against them. Cases have been filed against individuals who were not even present in the country at the time of the alleged “crime,” and even against deceased individuals.

The image of law enforcement

agencies has taken a heavy blow in recent years because of the crimes allegedly committed by some of their members. In recent times, law enforcers holding high positions have been accused of extortion or withholding evidence to favour suspects in a crime. But it is the politicisation of the police and other law enforcement agencies that has been the biggest letdown for the people.

It is disturbing that, in a democracy, ordinary people fear the police more than they fear criminals. And this is because there have been too many instances where law enforcers have worked at the behest of individuals connected to power, rather than protecting the person who has been victimised. Even during non-political movements such as the students' road safety campaign and the quota reform movement, law enforcers were unnecessarily harsh on the activists and indulgent of groups assaulting the youths.

The upcoming election will show us whether our law enforcement agencies will live up to the role declared for them by the CEC, as well as the role we, the people, want to see them play – which involves protecting every member of the public, regardless of their political affiliation.