

The EC must not sell itself short

It must do more to ensure a conducive environment for the election

Hardly anyone – except, of course, the ruling party and its allies – would disagree with the Election Commission’s comment on Thursday that the expected environment is yet to be created for holding a free, fair, participatory, and festive parliamentary election. We can also all safely agree with the EC that the answer to the current political stalemate lies in a constructive dialogue, not power play on the streets, which, in all likelihood, will get more aggressive in the days to come. What we do object to is the EC’s claim that “it is a political matter” and that the “EC has nothing to do in this regard.”

The EC has categorically refused to accept the responsibility of facilitating dialogues between the two major political parties in the country, shifting the blame to the parties themselves as well as the civil society for not playing their due roles in resolving the stalemate. While the Awami League and the BNP certainly deserve their share of the blame for their stubborn refusal to compromise on their positions, the question remains as to what the EC itself has done to restore trust in its ability to do its job. Thus far, it has failed to ensure a level playing field for the opposition parties; it has neither addressed the widespread violence by ruling party men, at times with the support of law enforcement, in various parts of the country, nor has it spoken about the thousands of new and old cases that are now being filed or expedited against BNP activists. When asked about a level playing field, the CEC commented that they would try to ensure it once the schedule was declared. The fact that the EC is still insisting on a very narrow definition of the pre-election period – the time between the election schedule’s announcement and the polling day – is highly problematic.

From halving the number of local election monitoring observers from 2018, to giving red carpet reception to a new poll monitoring group with questionable credentials, to selecting seven organisations for poll monitoring which don’t even exist (as per an investigation by *Prothom Alo*), the EC has made one questionable decision after another. Given that the BNP’s main objection to participating in the election is their staunch belief that the current EC cannot ensure a neutral environment in which polling can take place, the least the commission can do is allay those concerns and show that it is not impartial.

The EC must not sell itself short by deeming itself helpless to create an environment conducive to free and fair elections. It can and must do more to create a level playing field for all political parties, and actively facilitate discussions between the two major parties for an acceptable solution to the current impasse.

More heatwaves, more deaths

We need heat-resilient infrastructure to shield our young and elderly

As global temperatures continue to hit new records, heatwaves are getting deadlier by the day in Bangladesh, taking lives of the already vulnerable. In just four years, from 2017 to 2021, we lost around 1,430 people aged 65 and above due to heat-related health complications. This number, revealed by a recent study, is shocking as, just over a decade ago, the four-year death toll was less than half. How did we get here? That question is, unfortunately, not hard to answer, as we have witnessed what has gone wrong right before our eyes.

Extreme weather events like heatwaves, which have increased by 46 percent since 2000, are the result of climate change, which is a consequence of our ruthless zeal for economic growth at the expense of the environment. The study revealed that climate change has put the health of millions of Bangladeshis at risk. And among them, it is the young, elderly and marginalised who have to bear the brunt of this crisis.

Not everyone has the means to take refuge from the scorching sun. While many have the luxury of staying in air-conditioned spaces, others – day labourers, rickshaw-pullers and farmers, who have no choice but to work in this blazing heat – only have the shade of trees to rely on. Around the world, the lower-income population faced a 40 percent higher exposure to heatwaves than those with higher incomes. So, is it really a surprise that the poor succumb to heatwaves more?

Rampant, unregulated urbanisation is erasing greenery, which is essential to keep our surroundings cool. As the towers of concrete rise, the temperature follows suit. According to a study, just going outdoors may become deadly in many parts of Bangladesh by the end of the century. So, what can we do to prevent this disaster?

Besides the mammoth task of fighting climate change, the government must address the local problems. Cities are behind most of the global warming and climate change-related vulnerabilities, and so proper and climate-friendly urban planning is essential. This entails more trees, robust public transport to limit carbon emissions, and buildings with natural shading and ventilation. Ultimately, egalitarian cities will ensure that everyone, regardless of their health and income level, can find shelter from the sun.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Trains must have clean toilets

The hygiene of train toilets has always been overlooked, leading to serious inconveniences for the passengers. Unsanitary toilets pose a severe health risk. Passengers deserve the basic amenities to make their travel experience more comfortable and convenient. It is high time the railway authorities recognised the importance of such facilities. This will not only benefit passengers but will also lead to increased satisfaction, revenue, and a positive image for the railway system as a whole.

Muhammad Ariful Islam
Mirpur, Dhaka

Who buys property abroad, and who pays for it?



Kallol Mustafa
is an engineer and writer
who focuses on power,
energy, environment and
development economics.

KALLOL MUSTAFA

Foreign exchange transactions in Bangladesh are regulated through the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, 1947 (amended in 2015). According to Section 5(l)(e) of this act, no citizen of Bangladesh is permitted to purchase property outside the country without the special approval of Bangladesh Bank. Yet, we have been seeing reports of Bangladeshi businessmen, politicians and bureaucrats buying properties abroad. Before, those who amassed wealth through corruption used to choose mainly Canada or Malaysia to purchase property. Now, with a rise in corruption and subsequently in the amount of money being laundered, countries like the UAE, Singapore, the United States, and the United Kingdom have been added to their choice list.

According to the EU Tax Observatory, based on the analysis of the data collected by the US-based Center for Advanced Defense Studies (C4ADS), 459 Bangladeshis bought 972 properties in Dubai till 2020 without disclosing information in Bangladesh. On paper, the value of these properties stands at \$312 million, but in reality it is much higher. After 2020, the tendency of rich Bangladeshi businessmen, bureaucrats, politicians, bankers and contractors to purchase residential properties in Dubai has increased. According to media reports, between January 2020 and June 2021, Bangladeshis invested Tk 346 crore in buying houses and flats in Dubai.

Bangladeshi nationals ranked ninth among the top 10 foreign property buyers in prime London locations in 2020, BDnews24.com reported citing *Showhouse*, a UK magazine on housebuilding industry. Bangladeshis accounted for 3.7 percent of prime transactions and were ahead of Japanese nationals, who stood at 2.8 percent of the transactions. There are records of at least 98 transactions by Bangladeshi nationals, valued at 122.89 million pounds, between January and September in 2020.

The cases of Bangladeshi rich buying real estate in the UK have increased consistently since 2010. In January 2010, the number of properties registered using Bangladeshi addresses in the UK was 15; by January 2016, the number rose to 52. Only five years later, by August 2021, the number more than doubled to 107. Looking at the list of buyers, it is evident that money looted from various megaprojects, from loans taken out of banks, and through

trade misinvoicing have been spent on buying luxurious properties abroad. Some of these buyers are former and current managing directors of state-owned and private banks, some are chairmen and even mid-level officials. There are also hundreds of RMG business owners, past and present high-profile politicians and bureaucrats among the buyers.

The pattern of economic development that has emerged in Bangladesh over the past decade is closely linked to corruption, purchase of foreign assets via money laundering, and the foreign exchange reserve crisis.



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These cases of illegal property purchase abroad are not the main acts of corruption – these are the symptoms. As corruption increases, the trend of money laundering abroad goes up, which in turn gives rise to hundi and export-import misinvoicing.

In the case of hundi, a person making money illegally in Bangladesh hands over the money in local currency to a hundiwalla, who delivers an equivalent amount in dollars to a designated foreign account. Similarly, a migrant worker abroad gives dollars to a hundiwalla via local agents, and the hundiwalla then pays an equivalent amount of taka to the relatives of the migrant worker in Bangladesh. As

long as there is a demand for money laundering, there will always be a space for high-rate dollar-selling through hundi; as a result, remittance coming through official channels will continue to decrease, affecting our forex reserves.

Besides hundi, money is regularly being laundered out of the country via over-invoicing during import and under-invoicing during export. For example, in a recently exposed money laundering scheme, 33 RMG factories and buying houses laundered at least Tk 821 crore over the last six years, according to the customs authorities. Two tactics were used for the illicit money transfer: under-invoicing and using the wrong shipping code. In the first tactic, prices were shown up to 10 times lower than the actual rate during export. In the second tactic, shipments were shown as “samples” when they were actually exports worth hundreds of crores of taka.

Although these incidents provide some insight into the ongoing

corruption and money laundering, they are only the tip of the iceberg. We can get an idea about the actual scale of corruption and the amount of money being laundered from the report of Global Financial Integrity (GFI), a US-based research organisation. According to the GFI, Bangladesh lost approximately \$8.27 billion annually on an average between 2009 and 2018 because of traders misinvoicing the values of goods to avoid taxes and/or to move money out of the country. Laundering money in these ways is adversely affecting our forex reserves. Despite various efforts, including curbing imports, the forex reserves have been declining by \$1 billion per month

for the last two years. Bangladesh’s gross forex reserves stood at \$48 billion in August 2021, which fell to \$26.74 billion as of October 2023, per the central bank’s traditional calculation method. However, according to the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) calculation method (BPM 6), our forex reserves are currently \$20.90 billion, and according to the Bangladesh Bank account disclosed only to the IMF, the net or actual reserves are under \$17 billion.

As there is a shortage of forex reserves, the LC opening for the import of various products and raw materials has to be restricted, which is putting pressure on the country’s economy, including the export sector. Corrupt money launderers in this way are destroying the future of millions of people in the country, while securing a bright future for their families abroad.

The government continues to blame the Russia-Ukraine war for the ongoing economic crisis, but corruption and money laundering, which are



COLLAGE: REHNUMA PROSHOON

Why we should care about the WGA strike



Aaqib Hasib
is a sub editor at The Daily Star.

AAQIB HASIB

Unless you have been abstaining from the internet for the last six months, regardless of where you live, you have heard about the writers’ strike that is going on in the US. In particular, this strike involves two main parties: the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). The WGA comprises over 12,000 writers who operate in Hollywood, while the AMPTP is a trade association that represents more than 350 film and television production companies, including the likes of Paramount, Sony, Warner Bros, Universal, Disney, Netflix, and so on.

Now, you might ask, “Well, this is happening in the US. Why do I care?”

Highly anticipated films and TV series that are incredibly popular all over the world were put on hold as a result of this strike. But even more than that, the ability to strike and demand things from large corporations – who are notorious for underpaying workers – has some resonance when it comes to Bangladesh as well.

This strike came about because writers wanted fairer compensations,

proper residuals, regulation of artificial intelligence (AI), better working standards, and anti-discrimination measures.

Now, compensation is easy to understand. Writers are notably underpaid around the world. Residuals, however, are a more complicated matter. Simply put, residuals are payments writers get whenever their work is reused. As an example, say you wrote a show that was aired on TV. Afterwards, DVDs and digital downloads of the show were also sold, which would result in a writer getting a cut from it. Similarly, if the show is sold to other countries to be aired, writers would also get a cut then. Basically, every time a piece of content makes some money again, a writer – who has played a role in creating this content – gets some amount of money.

Now, all of this went out the window when streaming platforms entered the market. See, Netflix can commission a show that is initially released in North America only. Then, when it makes its way to other countries, Netflix decides how much it pays. While previously it would involve media companies in

other countries paying top dollar to get the rights to air a show, now Netflix just makes it available in another country and pays close to minimal residuals to the people who were responsible for making the show in the first place.

This is how writers get unfairly treated. Streaming made content so accessible and easy to monetise that these companies got a little too greedy and decided they could just get away with not paying writers their fair dues. As a result, the WGA decided to initiate a strike.

Another big point was the use of AI. We have already seen AI’s capability to write things. And while it may not be great at writing long-form fictional content right now, it won’t be the case a little way down the line. AI is being trained on documents from a wide array of topics, and if these big production companies choose to feed their back catalogue of scripts, it won’t take AI too long to adapt to writing content.

If there is one thing the billion-dollar companies know how to do, it is cutting costs, and if we left them to their devices, I am certain very soon all of the content we consume would be created by AI. While the ethics of this is a whole other discussion, I don’t think it is difficult to see why it would be problematic if AI started taking over human jobs, mostly ones that require years of skill and training.

Late last month, the WGA strike finally came to an end after almost 146 days, after reaching a tentative agreement. While details of the deal

have not been fully disclosed, WGA sources have said they got most of what they were looking for. A splendid and well-deserved victory.

Now, why should any of this matter to us in Bangladesh? Well, the noose around our pockets has gotten tighter. Our salary is almost gone five days after it hits our bank accounts, and things are just not doing so great economically. Amid all of this, we have not had widespread wage or salary adjustments to deal with the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. Irrespective of how bad the industry you work in is doing, someone has gotten rich over the years on the back of the average worker’s hard work. But now, when inflation is making people go broke, everyone wants to cry about how money is tight.

If Bangladesh had stronger unions, in every sector, we wouldn’t be in this situation. Regardless of whether you’re a labourer, writer, journalist, executive, etc, you deserve fairer pay to reflect the market you’re in right now.

When the WGA went on strike, people rallied around in support. Actors, musicians, TV personalities, average people all came forward to support the writers. GoFundMe pages and charities were operating round the clock to make sure these writers were not forced to return to work because they had gone broke. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, I don’t see that kind of kinship. But maybe someday we will realise that we need to stand by each other when battling large organisations that see our lives as a means to their end.