

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Don't let road safety be held hostage

Transport leaders continue to block full implementation of RTA

The Road Transport Act (RTA) was passed five years ago, in a somewhat hurried manner following a widespread protest led by school students. The law, as the government had promised back then, was aimed at safeguarding the lives of passengers, drivers and pedestrians on the road. Five years later, our roads are not any safer. In fact, according to road safety advocates, roads in Bangladesh – particularly in Dhaka – have become increasingly dangerous, especially for pedestrians.

This hardly comes as a surprise, seeing as the road safety law is yet to be fully implemented. Unlike the Digital Security Act (DSA), which was passed around the same time as RTA and was implemented right away, the government has faced numerous hurdles to put the latter into effect. As passenger welfare advocates have pointed out time and again, transport leaders, most of whom either have strong ruling party connections or are part of the ruling regime themselves, have heavily influenced the government's decisions in their favour. Sadly, those decisions have often proven to be detrimental for the people.

Take, for example, the matter of unfit vehicles. The state-owned Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), on May 17, issued an order to cap the economic life of buses and trucks, aiming to reduce road crashes as well as pollution. That decision was put on hold by the Road Transport and Highways Division (RTHD) less than four months later, when they caved in under the pressure of transport associations. This has been the case for almost all road safety-related decisions. This is why, despite passing the law in September 2018, the government was only able to finalise its rules in December 2022.

By failing to withstand the influence of transport owners and leaders, our government has failed to ensure safety for us on the road. According to BRTA data, between 2015 and 2022, more than 21 people have been killed and 39 more injured in road crashes every day on average. According to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, these numbers are much higher. Dhaka has been found to be the most unsafe place in the country, which is ironic, seeing as it is also the safest city in the world, traffic-wise.

It's high time our government stopped caving in to the vested interest groups in our transport sector, who throw tantrums whenever an official decision to improve road safety goes against their favour. The government must remember that it is mandated to serve the people, not the transport owners and associations.

Hilsa fishermen left in the lurch

Ensure adequate compensation during fishing ban

We are concerned that, even after 12 days of the ongoing 22-day ban – which began on October 11 midnight – on hilsa fishing, around 15,000 fishermen in Patuakhali district are yet to receive the allotted aid from the government. Meanwhile, thousands of the affected fishermen are not even enlisted in the government's aid programme. The question of food security has been one of the primary concerns presented to the government by local fishermen, experts and media for many years; yet, we have witnessed the government failing to provide even the basic assistance to the fishermen, year after year, when they are forced to abstain from their primary source of livelihood.

The fishermen say the allocated amount of rice is 25 kg per family, which is woefully insufficient to support a family for 22 days. They have been demanding cash compensation for years, which has been ignored till now. On the other hand, we have been witnessing the persecution of fishermen violating this restriction. How justified is it to burden the impoverished fisherfolk with fines and imprisonment, when they are often the sole earners of their families and are forced to forego the only profession they know, without being provided with an alternative option?

We agree that there is a need for regulations to ensure a healthy breeding season for hilsa, but we need to consider the effectiveness of the current approach, which pushes thousands of fishermen and their families into despair. First of all, without ensuring proper compensation, considering the actual cost of living for the fishermen's families, it is unrealistic to expect that all fishermen would comply with the ban. On top of that, there have been allegations that fishermen from India have been trespassing into our territory and catching hilsa during the ban, putting our fishermen at a significant disadvantage. Unless there is a coordinated effort among Bangladesh, India and Myanmar, the efforts to ban hilsa fishing on the Bangladesh side will fall short.

Hilsa conservation is a complex challenge, but the current approach of placing the entire burden on poor fishermen is unfair. At the very least, the government must ensure sufficient compensation for all affected fishermen during the period of fishing ban.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dhaka's accommodation crisis

Due to rapid population growth and urbanisation, Dhaka is facing a severe accommodation crisis. People come to Dhaka from all over the country for various purposes every day. Most of them are forced to live in slums or in overcrowded residences. Students who move to Dhaka are charged Tk 5,000-15,000 for rent, which is beyond their means. Even job-holders struggle to find affordable accommodation. It is now imperative that house rents are reduced and proper housing is ensured for everyone in the city.

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The Election Commission's credibility problem



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BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

Recently, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibur Awal frankly admitted that the Election Commission (EC) was facing a credibility problem. He attributed this problem to the controversial 2014 and 2018 general elections. We commend the CEC for admitting that the last two elections were indeed controversial. However, we respectfully request that the CEC and his colleagues look back and reflect upon how they themselves may have created this credibility problem in the first place.

Let's begin with the EC's appointment. According to The Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Appointment Act, 2022, only political parties and professional bodies are entitled to propose names, from which the Search Committee is to recommend names to the president for appointment to the commission. But the committee allowed anyone and everyone to propose names, even their own, which is a clear violation of the law. We know from the public statement of late Dr Zafarullah Chowdhury, who was not eligible to propose names, that he recommended Awal for the CEC's post. Other ineligible individuals must have proposed names of other commissioners, which clearly makes the appointment of the present commission legally questionable. There are serious allegations that this violation was part of a strategy to appoint the ruling party's chosen individuals to the commission. The inclusion of former election commissioner Sohul Hossain, who sought nomination from the Awami League in the last election, in the Search Committee clearly adds currency to this allegation.

Furthermore, the law required that the appointment be made in a transparent manner. But unlike its predecessor, the Search Committee did not even make public the names of the 10 finalists recommended to the president. All this created suspicions of behind-the-scenes manipulations in the appointment of the Awal commission. This author tried to

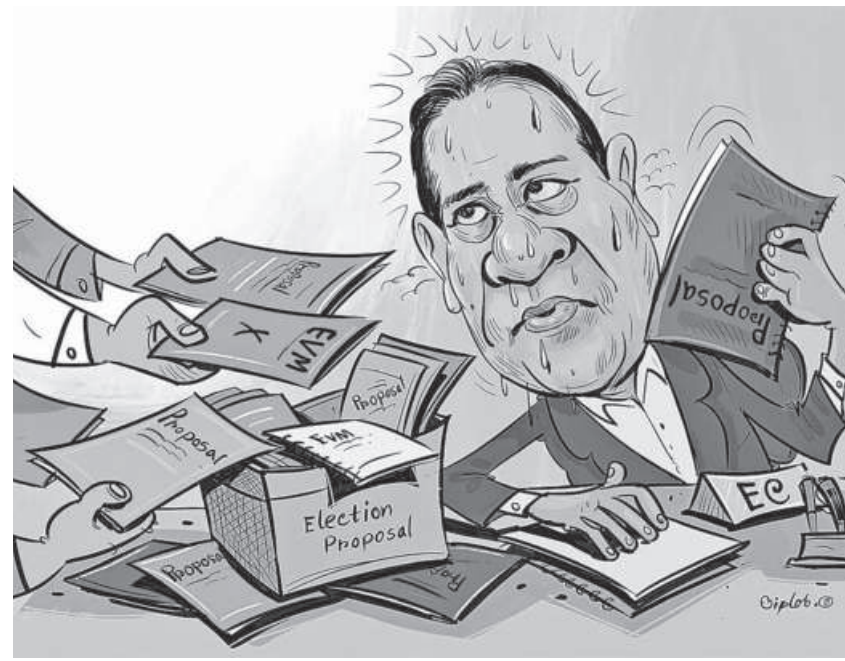


ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKRABORTY

remove this suspicion by making an RTI application, but the Cabinet Division failed to disclose the relevant information, against which a case is now pending before the High Court.

Let's now look at the EC's own controversial acts, which contributed to its credibility problem. One may recall that during the Cumilla city election, the first important election during its tenure, the Awal commission made an unfortunate flip-flop first by ordering lawmaker AKM Bahauddin Bahar to leave the city and then reversing its decision after his defiance. The commission also failed to explain the mystery behind the reversal of the final election outcome, causing the defeat of the departing mayor Monirul Haque based on the results of four centres that arrived last – several hours after the closure of polling carried out using EVMs. In absence of the EVMs' paper trail, results could not be recounted to verify its authenticity.

Talking about the EVMs, the EC vehemently insisted on using it at first in all 300 constituencies and later in at least 150 constituencies, even though Prof Jamilur Reza

Choudhury, who was the head of the EC-appointed technical committee, refused to endorse the purchase of EVMs without paper trail. To justify the purchase of 200,000 new EVMs at the cost of nearly Tk 9,000 crore, the EC even misrepresented the number of political parties that

the district, under whose watch the rigging took place. The EC also failed to punish the small fries – the lower-level functionaries – even though it had the authority to do so.

The EC's credibility was further tarnished by the Dhaka-17 by-election, which was not contested by major political parties like BNP. It may be recalled that during the election, Hero Alam, a minor contestant, was beaten up in front of a polling centre, raising serious questions about the EC's capacity to peacefully hold even a by-election in one single constituency.

In addition, the election commissioners hurt their credibility by making untrue and misleading statements. For example, in 2022, the EC sent several recommendations to the law ministry for amending the Representation of People Order (RPO). In its recommendations, the EC proposed to replace the term "election" by "polling" in Section 91, reducing its authority to postpone the election or cancel results because of anomalies, on the day of the polling rather than during the entire election cycle. When this became public, the EC first denied, but later admitted to it, claiming that the change would not reduce its authority, despite the contrary view of all other election experts.

Finally, the EC's decision to go ahead with the coming election, even though major political parties such as BNP, Islamic Andolon, and others have declared not to participate under the present constitutional framework, raises serious questions about its credibility. We know from our history that we never had free and fair elections held under the party in power, and the same is bound to happen even if all parties contest the election, as in 2018. Given this, one cannot help but conclude that by insisting on going ahead with the election, the EC wants to ensure that the ruling party stays in power. The plausibility of this conclusion becomes apparent with the CEC's assertion that what is important is people can vote without any hindrance, rather than who is contesting and who is not. This is clearly a justification for holding a one-sided election, defying the very definition of the term "election," which involves choice – voters choosing from credible alternatives. With such a one-sided election, we strongly feel that the EC would not be able to meet its constitutional obligation to hold free, fair and credible elections.

How can we bring our canals back from the dead?



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OINDRIZA REZA NODI

Imagine a formidable rainfall of 134 millimetres flooding the whole city within a day – bringing commuters to a halt for hours, and tragically putting to death a whole family in Mirpur – while dengue raises fatalities precipitously in just a few months. This description might resonate with a cataclysmic movie scene, but alas! These are merely hard news from the ever-bustling megacity of Dhaka.

A study published in 2011 stated that Dhaka witnessed the desiccation of about 60 percent of its existing wetlands and 65 percent of rivers and canals in the last three decades. Many argue that rapid, unplanned urbanisation is the major culprit behind the loss of water bodies, resulting in acute waterlogging. Meanwhile, as polluted canals remain exposed, they breed mosquitoes resulting in recurrent dengue outbreaks, the most widespread one occurring this year, killing over 1,200. Clearly, terrains that once birthed and nourished the city have now mutated into sullied, ominous urban risks.

The canals of Dhaka are vanishing; they are victims of a lack of systematic development, but there is still a chance to recompense. A strategically devised plan for the city will help to sustain the

cleanliness of the canals. By improving the urban fabric around and along the water bodies, the community's relationship can be rebuilt with the waters through diverse activities. In his book *Designing Dhaka: A Manifesto for a Better City* (2012), architect Kazi Khaleed Ashraf urges planners to think beyond "land-use" planning, introducing a new term – "land-water use" planning. Dhaka's morphology will harmonise with urbanisation only when its water bodies are paid due attention in planning schemes, a mantra that can placate the flooding canals, and bridge the gap between urban and riverine Dhaka.

Dhaka should be re-evaluated under a new planning scheme that promotes a river or canal-based transit-oriented development (TOD). The canals have the potential to facilitate regional water transportation networks or become community transit channels. But why should TOD be implemented? For the city, boating services can prove to be much faster for local commuters, as witnessed at Hatirjheel lake. The Dhaka Structure Plan, 2016-2035 proposes the TOD model – incorporating metro rail, bus stations, auto-rickshaws, and rickshaw stations for transportation facilities.

If we oblige the inclusion of boat stations as a part of the TOD, waterway excavation projects will be conducted regularly, and this will in turn ensure the active use and revival of our waterways. All these positive outputs come in a package. In this endeavour, a community-level intervention is necessary to revive our locales' relationship with water.

From a detailed site appraisal of the Kalyanpur canal, which I have carried out as part of a university study, it was deduced that two major nodes have spontaneously formed in the neighbourhood. There is a central transit area at Kalyanpur bus stand, containing crowds from all over the city (75-100 passengers change transport mode per minute), and a smaller scale of transit occurs within the neighbourhood, where pedestrians exchange modes of transport for non-motorised vehicles (10-15 passengers per minute). Therefore, besides a central TOD that incorporates the canal, community transit nodes should also be proposed at regular walkable intervals to facilitate neighbourhood commuting using the water body. Such nodes would resemble the characteristics of a public square that accommodates transit facilities for vehicles such as small boats, rickshaws, autorickshaws, and bicycles.

Since the central transit station will connect multiple regions of Dhaka, commuters should be attracted with a riveting visual and physical experience highlighting the canal. The station's design must provide direction to crowds to the boat service edge, on-street vehicle stands and the pedestrian edge along the canal. The station can be a low-height,

green-roofed, vibrant pavilion where temporariness of commercial activities is given priority, with restaurants and recreational activities providing a rejuvenating interlude to commuters, like the ones in Bangkok or Istanbul.

The canal's edge should be a safe, interactive space for pedestrians. To begin with, the internal neighbourhood streets that vehicles use should be reconnected, and then linked to the edge through landscaping, allowing at least a 15-metre buffer zone between the canal and built structures. Pedestrianism must be facilitated by commercialising the ground floors by the edge, and infill spaces should be designed to accommodate the needs of an inclusive society, introducing activities like community gardening, playgrounds, and shops. Besides implementing a holistic planning scheme for the city's canals, it is imperative for the communities to utilise the socio-economic resources that these water bodies can offer.

For years, Dhaka dwellers harboured the insolence to devour all water bodies of the city. The waters, having no alternative, drowned us to avenge the injustice that we inflicted upon it through our carelessness and greed. We must immediately reinstate the symbiotic relation with the waters, engendering a sense of responsibility and ownership within the community. As architect Khaleed Ashraf asserts, when waterfronts are reorganised as recreational, civic, economic, and transport hubs, they turn into the "sustainable lifeblood" for a city. So, can we not work strategically, citizens and implementers hand-in-hand, to let the blood flow free through Dhaka's veins?