

Don't let Dhaka turn into a battlefield

Let good sense—and constitutional obligations—prevail

October 28 has finally arrived. Like the general public, we too feel apprehensive about what the day might entail, given the increasingly incendiary remarks coming from both parties in the lead-up to the day, and their uncompromising stance regarding an election-time government. BNP has said they will resist if attacked, while the AL has vowed to be on the streets to make sure that BNP activists cannot engage in violence. Given the not-so-subtle hints of retaliation, and the close proximity in which BNP and AL rallies will take place in Dhaka, we cannot help being worried about a potential violent showdown.

Was this state of affairs unavoidable? The Awami League could have easily allowed the BNP to hold a peaceful rally, instead of calling a counter-rally on the same day—as the party has done when the opposition has organised a major demonstration in the country, making such confrontations not only a possibility but an inevitability on many occasions. We should not have to remind the ruling party that the rights to peaceful assembly and association are enshrined in our constitution. AL leaders from different city units said they were asked to be fully ready to dominate the field, and that they would not be “empty-handed.” They have also promised to not allow BNP activists to spread throughout the city. In what capacity, we wonder, is AL making these statements? If law and order is to be maintained, surely the responsibility falls on our law enforcement agencies, not AL members. Besides, both BNP and AL are political parties with equal rights under the constitution. Why would one have unlimited and apparently armed access to the city, while members of another be stopped and harassed at every checkpoint in and leading to the city, and their mobile phones searched?

The BNP has, thus far, despite provocations from the AL, managed to keep their toes out of violent waters. This time around, however, they seem poised to retaliate. We urge them to exercise restraint; the answer to their frustration does not lie in violence, but in a strong and sustained peaceful movement that has the people's support. It would do well to remember that its violent tactics before the 2014 polls did not succeed and, in fact, alienated large sections of the public.

In this tense climate, it is the state and state apparatuses who have the most to prove today. First and foremost, they must separate themselves from the ruling party and stop acting as an extension of them. We urge them to stop harassing opposition activists and ordinary people, and unlawfully checking their phones ahead of the rally. They must play their due role in ensuring peace and security, without resorting to unlawful arrests or unprovoked violence, and demonstrate neutrality in the face of violence by either BNP or AL members.

We call upon the two parties to see reason and avoid violence at all costs. They must not hold Dhaka and its residents hostage to their whims and power play. They should not forget that a large section of Dhaka's population are day labourers or small businessmen who depend on their daily earnings. If the battle for power is being fought for the sake of “the people,” then the least the parties can do is take the inconvenience, insecurity and vulnerability of the public into consideration. Dhaka should not be turned into a battlefield.

Canal reeling from decade-long pollution

Why have authorities failed to address this issue for so long?

Yet another canal, already a dying breed, is on the verge of extinction due to rampant pollution, and we are concerned that the rest of our water bodies will meet the same fate if the relevant authorities keep brushing aside this perennial problem. Connected to Karnaphuli and Sangu rivers, the Shikalbaha canal in south Chattogram has been enduring mountains of waste from hundreds of dairy farms for well over a decade, as reported by this daily. Even though such actions are punishable under the Environment Conservation Act, the administration has done very little to stop this damage.

About 600 farms in the area are rearing 25,000 head of cattle, and every day, 3,000 tonnes of dung and two lakh litres of urine are produced, a large part of which directly flows into Shikalbaha through pipes and drains, and eventually into the two rivers. The farms point to the absence of waste treatment plants for their actions—only 50 of the establishments have this facility. The question is: is this a good enough excuse to destroy a canal that bears the brunt of monsoon and facilitates irrigation?

From Shyamasundari and Karikapara canals in Rangpur and Khulna to the Buriganga River, our water bodies have been reeling from unchecked pollution, encroachment, and “development.” When it comes to pollution, there are even incidents of the authorities themselves dumping waste into canals, ponds and rivers.

Whenever officials are confronted about such matters, they have a set of responses. They may claim ignorance of long-standing pollution, point to shortage of resources, as is the case with Shikalbaha, or simply state that they are looking into the issue. Such repeated responses will surely push our water bodies even closer to their demise.

So, are our canals destined for death? No—that is, if the authorities have their priorities straight. Recently, we have seen how a cartoonist, with the help of volunteers, organisations and officials, cleaned up a heavily polluted canal in Dhaka's Mohammadpur in just two days, proving that what we are lacking is initiative.

Aside from regular cleanups and maintenance, we need robust strategies. Waste treatment plants are a must-have to prevent establishments from polluting nearby water bodies, and the authorities have to launch effective behavioural change campaigns so that people are well aware of the dire ramifications of dumping waste into canals and ponds. With such initiatives, alongside proper enforcement of the laws, we can hope that our canals will once again flow freely.

What should and shouldn't happen in Oct 28 rallies



BLACK, WHITE AND GREY
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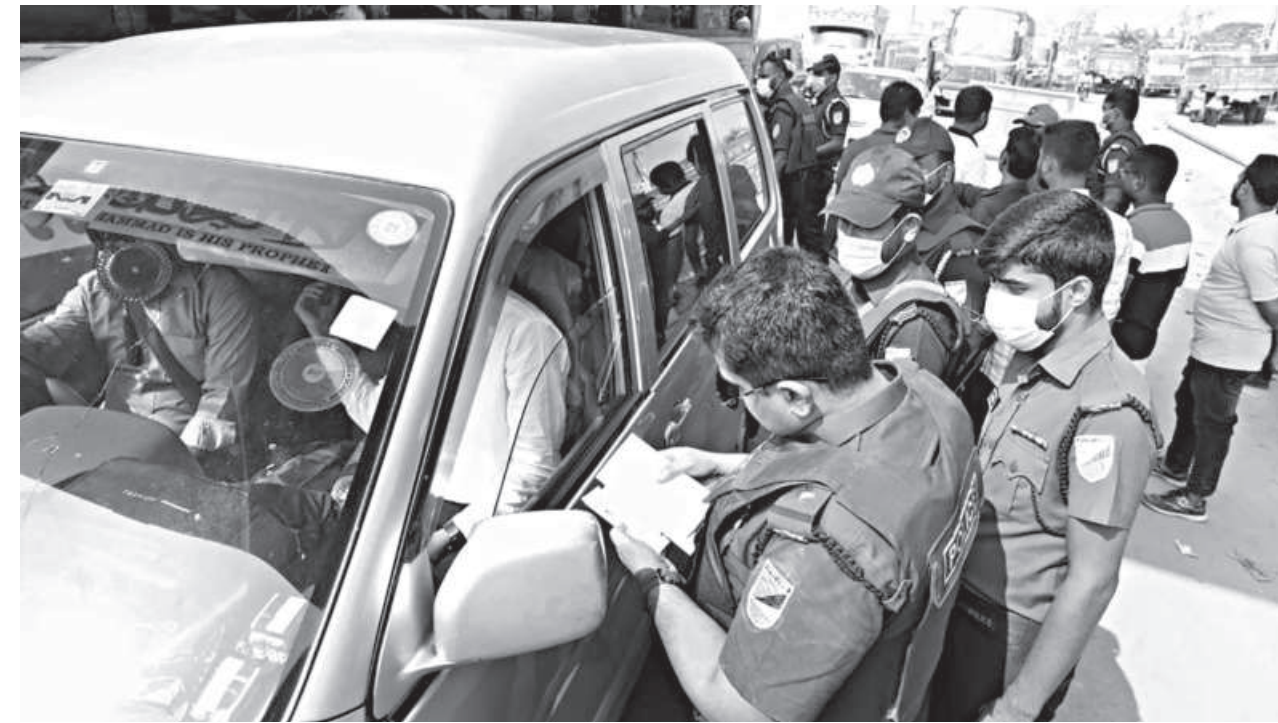
The country is in an anxious mood as October 28 is now upon us. Over the past few months, the opposition parties, particularly the BNP, declared that it would organise a large gathering in Dhaka to commence the last phase of their movement to realise its demands—resignation of the current government, and the appointment of a neutral, election-time government—to pave the way for a free, fair, inclusive, and acceptable election. Many are pondering what the day will look like. The fear that violence may erupt and lead to clashes between members of law enforcement agencies and ruling party activists and the opposition activists looms large.

While the opposition has declared that the rally is to press the government to heed their demands, the ruling party leaders have said they won't allow the opposition on the street. As reported in the press, AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader has said this is their battle for existence—and that they will occupy every nook and cranny of the city for two days ahead of the opposition's rally. Why should an opposition rally, however big, pose

The date has a history to it. In 2006, on this day, then opposition AL activists, at the instruction of the leaders, held rallies in Dhaka with sticks and rowing paddles (logi-baitha). Violence against then ruling BNP supporters was unleashed and deaths ensued, which were never condemned by the AL leaders—neither then nor now.

an existential question for the ruling party, which has been in power for 14 years and claims to have enormous public support behind it?

The opposition's demands are not new; they have gained traction and popularity over a long time. Two consecutive general elections—in 2014 and 2018—described by the international media as “transparently fraudulent” have given credence to the demand as much as the voters' experience. The history of 11 parliamentary elections held since independence bears out that elections under partisan government have never been free and fair. History aside, a recent opinion poll by the NDI-IRI revealed that 44 percent of respondents think a reinstatement of the neutral caretaker government akin to 2008 is necessary to hold an acceptable election. Another 25 percent want a national unity government. It is only a quarter of respondents who support the current system. The international community, particularly the US, has been underscoring the need to create a conducive environment for elections,



Ahead of October 28 rallies, police have reportedly been questioning and searching people travelling in public and private vehicles.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

an implicit message that the current arrangement is not satisfactory. A pre-election assessment mission of the United States' National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI) has noted that “the current political environment presents significant obstacles to electoral integrity.”

It's against this backdrop that the opposition rallies have been called. In the past one and a half years, whenever the opposition called for a rally, the ruling party held counter rallies on the same day. It has become evident that the ruling party's rallies are not only to demonstrate its strength and boost its supporters' morale, but also to provoke the opposition to engage in violence. While the opposition showed utmost restraint, law enforcement agencies were aggressive and often adopted unlawful measures against the opposition. The ruling party activists were given free rein to swoop on opposition activists. These actions were matched with incendiary rhetoric of the ruling party leaders.

With the election less than three months away, the prevailing uncertainty regarding the system under which the election will take place, and who will participate, the rallies have created anxiety among common people for understandable reasons. The date has a history to it. In 2006, on this day, then opposition AL activists, at the instruction of the leaders, held rallies in Dhaka with sticks and rowing paddles (logi-baitha). Violence against then ruling BNP supporters was unleashed and deaths ensued, which were never condemned by the AL leaders—neither then nor now. Instead, in the past days, they have evoked the memory of it, which is a threat to the opposition as well as non-partisan citizens.

Leading to the rallies, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) has reportedly set a maximum number of

attendees for each rally. The argument to limit the number goes against the very grain of the right to assembly stipulated in the constitution. The argument that large gatherings will disrupt the daily lives of city residents appears to be a lame excuse. There have been many instances where disruptions have been tolerated by the police. Besides, it's election time; to

consider it as “normal” is not helpful in ensuring people's right to assembly. Instead, it sends a message that everything is bound to be within the perimeter set by the authorities. Such a measure reinforces the belief that the election will be no different than this. Opposition parties have repeatedly assured citizens that they would remain peaceful. On previous occasions, they largely have; yet, we must remind them to remain true to their promises. We expect that these rallies will be peaceful and there won't be provocations by the rival political parties' activists. But it is incumbent on the state actors, such as the police and other law enforcement agencies, to ensure it by not provoking through their actions. One such action is to refrain from making arrests of opposition activists on the way to and from the rallies, let alone during

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the rallies. The recent spate of arrests of opposition activists using long dormant cases, many of which are appropriately called “ghost cases,” must be stopped—not only for the sake of the rally, but for the coming months.

In some measures, October 28 is a test for the law enforcement members

whether they would continue to act as the henchmen of the ruling party and protect them while these activists engaged in unlawful acts and behaved as if they were deployed by the state. The line between the ruling party, the government and the state has already been obliterated over the past years. It is too much to expect that it will be reversed in a day, or that behaving

differently will restore confidence in them. Yet, it will go a long way towards having a peaceful day.

The call by the AL to its activists to bring sticks is an open provocation and threat to the peace and safety of peaceful citizens, not to mention to opposition rally goers. The law enforcement, if it intends to demonstrate any kind of neutrality, should have asked the AL to rescind this instruction. As of writing this commentary, there were no reactions from the police. In the past year, on the day of the rally and occasionally in the days before the opposition rallies, police have unlawfully searched mobile phones of activists and others while they were travelling in public and private vehicles. It has been reported in the media that this is being repeated ahead of October 28. Deplorable is an understatement to condemn this.

Considering their past experiences of being stopped on the road on the day of the rally, thousands of opposition activists have been on their way to Dhaka over the past few days. Perhaps this is equally true of the ruling party activists. None of them should be prevented from coming and joining the respective rallies. Anything to the contrary is unconstitutional and should be considered as an effort to undermine the election process. In such instances, public officials will be held responsible.

In some measures, the preceding points are just a list of what should or shouldn't happen. By the end of the day, we will know what expectations of ours have been fulfilled, and which actors transgressed. If there are acts of violence, lives may be lost, and trading blame will follow. But the question which all will ponder is: what is next? In some measures, the answer to the question lies in how the day goes. But it cannot be ignored that the nation came to this day because a path to hold a fair election is absent, and that the current system of governance has undermined the citizens' right to exercise their inalienable right to vote. As Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibul Awal has lately acknowledged, a “favourable election environment has not been achieved yet.” For the opposition, there is no other way but to continue to press for their demands, to engage more people and adopt as many peaceful means as they have at their disposal while being subjected to judicial and extrajudicial persecution. One could ask: is there a threshold to the opposition's tolerance? For the ruling party, there is a clear pathway, in the words of the NDI-IRI Roadmap: “moderate rhetoric and engage in open and substantive dialogue on key election issues.”

Passing the day, peacefully or otherwise, does not guarantee that there won't be another day or more like this soon. Perhaps worse is in the making, unless this day is followed by actions to address the fundamental cause of such a face-off situation. Obstinacy, belligerence, and incendiary rhetoric are recipes for a disaster, not a way to solve the crisis.



Police check a man's mobile phone at a checkpoint in Tarabo, Narayanganj, next to the Sultana Kamal Bridge, which is an entry point of the capital city, on October 27, 2023.

PHOTO: SOURAV HOSSAIN SIAM