

All about fair and unfair elections



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The quality of the upcoming general election is at the centre of national and international attention. And rightly so, because Bangladesh's democratic and sustainable development future hinges on it to a great extent. Democratic backsliding through the widely questioned 2014 and 2018 elections and the comprehensive hollowing out of accountability structures and processes across all aspects of governance over the past decade have elevated the upcoming election beyond a routine political event. It rather looks as a do-or-die existential window to restore political and institutional accountability at all levels of the state and political life.

The quality of the election is also critical for the health of the economy and the prospects of an inclusive economic future. Economic managers empowered by political masters over the past decade have transformed economic policymaking into a corrupt playbook to benefit narrow oligarchic interests at the cost of fostering a competitive economy and inclusive growth. The gathering economic crisis is obvious to laymen and experts alike, but key managers of the economy continue to be in denial. The election is critical from this angle too, to bring economic management face-to-face with ground realities and prioritise a comprehensive course correction.

What makes an election fair? Ruling party spokespersons appear to suggest that their "assurances" should suffice to put the matter at rest. However, there is universal scepticism about relying only on such assurances. But rather than dwelling on definitional debates on what constitutes "fairness," a more meaningful political discussion is about how elections become "unfair." One does not need to go far

to find the answers to this question. Bangladesh's electoral experience over the preceding decade provides enough "lessons" on how elections can become unfair.

There are four areas of lesson-learning. The first is in the nature of the pre-election environment. The key instrument of "unfairness" in the pre-election phase is the suppression of political competition. The use of criminal judicial proceedings—cases, arrests, etc—is a common playbook in this regard. But what distinguishes the last decade in Bangladesh is the complete weaponisation of this instrument. The principal political challenger to the ruling party has had to remain politically active under a Himalayan weight of nearly half a million cases. New popular terminology has sprung up to

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PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

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capture this strategy by the ruling party of weaponising criminal legal proceedings to immobilise political opposition. *Gayebi mamla* or ghost cases with made-up accusations have proliferated exponentially. This is not to say there may be genuine instances that warrant judicial proceedings. But the eerie similarity in accusations routinely making the rounds, constant drip of stories in the media where fact-checking exposes the made-up nature of accusations, and the new innovation of including a provision for a very large number of *oggatonama* or "unknown" accused to slap cases on mostly opposition members hint at the underlying story quite clearly. If some diligent sociologist was to undertake a study in today's Bangladesh on the social base of opposition political parties, a likely finding would be a phenomenon of a very large number of internally displaced "political refugees" compelled to be "absent"

from home in another district or another location, in an unforgiving and economically ruinous struggle to navigate the treacherous burden of such *gayebi mamla*. The objective of the ruling group in many such cases is not necessarily to convict, but simply to keep the accused on the run.

The other key concerning aspect of the pre-election environment is how confrontational are street realities. On this count, the political opposition has been remarkable in its dogged pursuit of peaceful mobilisation over the preceding year-long run up to the upcoming election. But to what extent this will sustain remains an open question as the political positions of the ruling party and the opposition remain diametrically opposed. It is a moot question whether the heavy-handed police action and the return of hartal is signalling the beginning of a breakdown in the delicate tight-rope

walking that has so far characterised the pre-election environment.

Elections can also become "unfair" in the quality of election management both in setting the stage for the election and the quality of oversight over the election process on election day. There have been three syndromes at work here contributing to making the election unfair. First has to do with partisan decisions on granting registration to new political party applicants or on the approved list of election observing bodies. The recent decisions on these matters have already marked the new Election Commission with a partisan stamp. Recent public utterances by some of the commissioners only reinforce the perception. The second election commission syndrome making elections unfair is the ready surrender of its powers to the executive branch to choose returning officers at district/sub-district level and presiding officers

for election centres, despite the knowledge that the umbilical cord between the ruling party and the administration is too strong to avoid partisan management of election. Yet, this need not be if the Election Commission decides to exercise its jurisdictional powers. Similarly, an additional syndrome at work is the propensity of the partisan Election Commission to adopt an attitude of "see nothing, do nothing" when blatant anomalies occur on the election day. These anomalies can range from open ballot stuffing, voter intimidation within the booth, voter intimidation outside the centre, to pre-election day voter intimidation, prevention of voters from reaching the centre, etc.

Elections can be made unfair even after voting has ceased in terms of how counting is supervised and results announced. Recent experiences have thrown up these bitter truths time after time. And this tendency has extended to controlling the post-election narrative, too, by various types of media curbs.

Will the next election be fair? However, the current political uncertainties work out, the road to a fair election appears neither certain nor easy. At least three factors absolutely have to be addressed to reverse the entrenched unfair realities bearing on the election. The Election Commission has to be purged of its partisan tendency. It has to take control of the election process from the authority of administration. And most importantly, the ongoing suppression of political competition through the weaponisation of criminal proceedings a la *gayebi mamla* has to be reversed perhaps through a general amnesty and a moratorium on further such cases. This perhaps lies at the heart of the demand for a non-partisan poll time government. However that may be, such a step can be a game-changing, confidence-building measure that can radically alter the political mood. But the prospect of this seems distant for now with the violence centring October 28 political programmes hardening the political mood in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, it may be wise to keep the fair election priorities in focus.

MESSI'S 8TH BALLON D'OR

Deserving or debatable?



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Nothing in life is certain except death, taxes, and Lionel Messi winning the Ballon d'Or. But perhaps this time, it could have been a different name because Erling Haaland also made for a remarkable candidate.

Prior to Haaland's anticipated arrival at Manchester City, the team continuously fell short of winning the UEFA Champions League. So, when he was signed on, many believed that the messiah had finally arrived. Flaunting his long golden hair, Haaland made the already indestructible team even better. Suddenly, City transitioned from being a guaranteed Premier League title winner to pursuing one of the most elusive statistics in English football: the treble. The last and the only other time this was achieved was back in 1998 by their own noisy neighbours, Manchester United.

Haaland was the missing piece in City's stellar, star-studded team. Moreover, he seamlessly fit into the system, embracing all the pressure that would not typically be reserved for a 23-year-old. He was the top scorer, with 12 goals in the Champions League campaign, and his five goal performance against Leipzig in the round of 16 matches was the talk of the town. Then, he also tore the Premier League apart. After 29 years, the king of English football Alan Shearer's 34 goal haul (a joint record with Andy Cole) was finally dethroned, with Haaland scoring 36 goals in the 2022/2023 campaign. Now, with 38 goals scored in 2023 alone, he is just one goal shy of breaking the record for the highest number of goals scored in a Premier League calendar year.

The numbers speak for themselves. When it comes to scoring goals, no one has been more clinical than Erling Haaland, and that is why he picked up the Gerd Müller Trophy, which is awarded to the top scorer of the year. But



Too often, the debate posits that the Ballon d'Or is an individual's award and that a team's performance should not be a deciding factor when picking the awardee. Even then, both Haaland's and Messi's individual performances have been a hallmark this year.

In the season when Haaland posted the most incredible numbers, Lionel Messi finally fulfilled his prophecy by winning the FIFA World Cup in Qatar.

For Messi, this was not just a World Cup victory; it was destiny that he had pursued too long in his illustrious career. It was the one trophy missing from his collection, and he won it in style. Seven goals and three assists in seven matches made Messi the best player of the tournament by a country mile.

Outside of the national team, Messi tallied up 20 goals and 20 assists in the 2022/2023 season with PSG. Nevertheless, there is the endless debate about the French league, Ligue 1, being far less competitive than the Spanish and English leagues. When you factor in PSG's line-up—featuring three of the greatest generational talents—they

wins a tournament.

Messi won the World Cup with Argentina, while Haaland's Norway did not even qualify. Does this not create an imbalance between their contributions to their repetitive national scenes? Is it even fair to blame Norway, a country that has limited significance on the world stage, for not winning the World Cup?

In contrast, PSG did not achieve anything out of the ordinary, and after the World Cup, Messi's situation at the club became somewhat hostile, leading to his eventual move to Inter Miami. Haaland, on the other hand, with the likes of Rodri, Ruben Dias, Bernardo Silva and Kevin De Bruyne aiding and abetting him, won the Champions League, defended their Premier League title, and clinched the FA Cup. That is extraordinary.

The most important point of the debate is that Haaland's performance reflects a stretch of a 12 month period during which he thumped goals from all angles, using every possible part of his body. Messi's performance was stellar for a period of six months, before he was made a scapegoat for PSG's early exit from the round of 16.

Then comes the debate of the positions they each play in. Messi inherited a freer role within the Argentina midfield, whereas Haaland was a sole number nine. His presence meant someone could finally finish all the beautiful lobs, crosses, and through balls from De Bruyne. However, using the argument of "but Haaland has x, y, and z on his team" does not really cut it in this debate, as both players have had the luxury of being surrounded by equally great mates at the club level.

Another counter argument is that Haaland did not score or make major contributions to City's semi-final and final matches in the Champions League. While that is factually correct, it still does not diminish his role in the season City had and the role his arrival played in elevating that missing mentality of optimism.

Too often, the debate posits that the Ballon d'Or is an individual's award and that a team's performance should not be a deciding factor when picking the awardee. Even then, both Haaland's and Messi's individual performances have been a hallmark this year. They both helped their respective countries and clubs attain the trophies most desired. Haaland is no longer second fiddle to Kylian Mbappe, and Lionel Messi is no longer a direct rival to Cristiano Ronaldo.

This debate will continue to ensue, as it remains a subjective matter of who deems what to be an extraordinary achievement or who felt most moved by which performance.

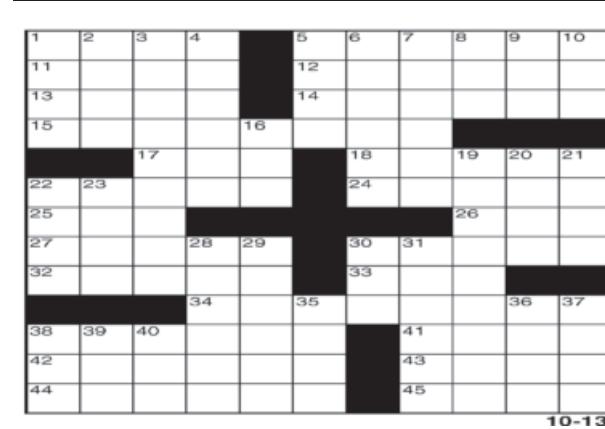
Football is all about romanticism; even the most cynical fan will admit this. For now, Haaland's biggest and perhaps only mistake in his young career so far is that he chose to have one of the greatest individual seasons at a time when romanticism is our only form of survival. Messi is football's greatest romantic story.

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