

Spare the economy more shocks

Political instability is hurting our already fragile economy

We are deeply concerned by how our economy, which has already been facing myriad difficulties for one-and-a-half years, stands to suffer more due to the ongoing political unrest. According to our latest report on the situation, the political turmoil that the country is embroiled in has already started to affect day-to-day economic activities. Added to that is the raging inflation, which the government is yet to bring under control despite its many assurances. Experts fear that if things continue as they are, our economic crisis may deepen further.

During the ongoing series of blockades, we have seen several incidents of arson attacks wherein buses were set on fire. Transportation of consumer goods as well as industrial raw materials have drastically reduced, disrupting domestic supply chains. A wholesale vegetable seller in Dhaka, for example, said he could not hire trucks to transport produce from farmers in Panchagarh, even by offering nearly double the amount of the usual fare. As a result, those farmers are forced to sell off their perishable products at reduced prices to avoid loss. Meanwhile, a supply shortage has been created in the capital, which means retail prices of vegetables are bound to shoot up—especially if unscrupulous traders take the opportunity to make quick profits.

Similarly, if raw materials are not transported to factories on time, production will suffer and export-oriented businesses will face the risk of missing deadlines. This heightens the chances of losing work orders to our competitors—and by extension losing avenues to earn foreign exchange, which we desperately need right now.

Have our political parties, who are refusing to budge from their stance of no compromise, taken note of this potential crisis we are facing? In October 2023, the inflation rate rose to 9.93 percent—a five-month high—and it is unlikely to improve before the election. This means if the current state of affairs persists, our lives are about to get even more difficult.

If our political parties are truly dedicated to the people's welfare—as they routinely claim to be—they must recognise how their political actions are affecting the economy, and by extension the ordinary people. While some level of political turmoil is usually expected in an election year, our economy is not in a usual state this time. We urge our political parties to pause and reflect on the crisis in hand, and act accordingly. At the same time, the government must initiate the process to reach a political consensus through an effective dialogue, realising that it won't be wise to subject our economy to further shocks.

Rohingya must be repatriated to their original villages

Myanmar must not backtrack on its promise

We are disappointed by the comments made by the Myanmar delegation who recently visited the Cox's Bazar refugee camps to verify the Rohingya's identities. The delegation was also there to brief the Rohingya about the repatriation process, citizenship procedures and other facilities. When the refugees reiterated their demand to return to their original homes—not to the villages or camps set up for them in Rakhine—the delegates apparently could not make any such commitment. Reportedly, all they could say was that they would discuss the matter with the higher authorities in Naypyidaw. We are surprised at their answer at a time when all arrangements are underway to start the repatriation process by sending the first batch of Rohingya—some 3,000 of them—to Myanmar by December this year.

Over the past few months, we witnessed some encouraging developments regarding the repatriation of Rohingya refugees to their homeland in Myanmar. China's initiative to mediate the process with Myanmar was particularly commendable, after years of foot-dragging by the international community to resolve the crisis. And after Chinese Special Envoy on Myanmar Deng Xijun hinted in early August that Myanmar may take back the Rohingya living in Cox's Bazar to their own villages in North Maungdaw and nearby places—instead of any camps or “model villages” that the Myanmar authorities had planned earlier—we were hopeful about the safe and dignified return of the Rohingya refugees, who have been living in squalid camps for the last six years.

Reportedly, in September, Myanmar agreed to allow international volunteers, including those from the UN, China and ASEAN countries, to take part in humanitarian assistance during the repatriation process. It also agreed to let the Rohingya visit Myanmar for a second time as a confidence-building measure.

But now we have learnt that Myanmar is planning to repatriate the Rohingya to 20 model villages on a pilot basis. This is unacceptable; the Rohingyas themselves have made this clear time and again. They have also demanded their citizenship and voting rights upon their return. Therefore, we would like to remind the Myanmar authorities that they cannot just backtrack on their promise of repatriating the Rohingya to their original villages. If they do so, it may result in another failed repatriation effort.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Splash of colour in Dhaka

Recently I saw graffiti, reminiscent of children's drawings, adorning the road dividers along Bijoy Sharani, showcasing iconic landmarks and infusing the cityscape with playful charm. Previously, the flyovers around Mogbajar have been transformed into canvases for artistic expression. These initiatives mark a positive shift in imagining Dhaka's aesthetic. I hope this trend will continue to flourish, allowing Dhaka to embrace vibrance and colour.

Minhaz Karim, Katabon, Dhaka

Our EC's critical failings



Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist. His X handle is @ahmedkal

KAMAL AHMED

Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibul Awal's latest plea to the parties to solve the ongoing political crisis is quite intriguing. Though his admission that a political crisis really exists is at odds with the government's claim of a conducive environment, his argument that the commission neither has the capacity nor the mandate to resolve it is only reneging itself of authority and responsibility. If the EC believes that there's a crisis which makes ensuring a free and fair election impossible, how can it justify proceeding with holding an election without resolving the crisis?

The EC's much publicised dialogue with all the registered parties took place after the 90-days countdown began till the 12th national election. Now, the EC stands to have sufficient legal authority to ask the executive branch for taking all necessary steps to create a fair and competitive environment. Many observers had thought that, ahead of the dialogue, the EC would take required steps to enable BNP to make its decision freely about joining the dialogue according to their party rules and policies. But in reality, the EC felt it had fulfilled its duty by delivering the invitation letter to an empty chair behind the locked gate of BNP's deserted central office.

This action, once again, raises questions about the EC's understanding of the Constitution's Article 126, which unambiguously states, “It shall be the duty of all executive authorities to assist the Election Commission in the discharge of its functions.” Given that this requirement of complying with the EC's directives is not subject to any other provision of the Constitution or any other law, we must ask: had the EC asked the executive branch to stop persecuting the opposition?

Though under the existing criminal law, it was possible and generally expected that the detained top leaders of BNP would be entitled to have conditional bail granted, their internment has been deliberately prolonged and made painful with longer remands instead. During a period when the government is supposed to restrict itself to routine work and not engage in any action that undermines or hinders fair competition among potential contenders, are we to assume that the EC has decided to look



In reality, the EC felt it had fulfilled its duty by delivering the invitation letter for the dialogue to an empty chair behind the locked gate of BNP's deserted central office.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

away and allow free reign to the ruling party? After all, this seems the only reasonable conclusion to draw, unless the government has refused to comply with the EC's requirements.

In the absence of visible action or a clarification on the part of the EC, can anyone be blamed for concluding that the EC is partisan and incapable of performing impartially and independently? Alas, we also struggle to forget the EC's repeated assertions that it has all the required authority and power to ensure a free and fair election.

The Awami League's repetition of its mantra of having elections as per the Constitution has reached such an incredulous level that one of the praesidium members of the party, Faruk Khan—who led his party's delegation at the EC talks—presented a new interpretation of constitutionalism. Faruk Khan said there is nothing in the Constitution that requires BNP's participation in elections. His assertion may be true, but one may also ask where in the Constitution elections effectively disenfranchise the people and guarantee success on the basis of securing nomination from the ruling party.

So, what is an election? And how has it been defined in our laws? Strangely, there is no complete legal definition of elections found in our laws. The only definition can be found in the Representation of the People Order, 1972 (President's Order), Section 2 (vii) of which says: “election” means election to a seat of a member held under this Order...”

any parties involved in the dispute is bound to face questions of legitimacy. During its tenure, the current EC has conducted hundreds of elections, but almost all of them have largely been contests between “official” and “rebel” nominees of the ruling Awami League.

And in a handful of real contests where popular non-AI figures took part in elections—with or without

Over the last 50 years, this law has been amended several times, but this incomplete and inadequate definition remained unchanged. Perhaps politicians across the spectrum prefer keeping the term virtually undefined, making it easy to interpret it however it favours them.

But Bangladesh, as a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is obliged “to adopt such laws or other measures as may be necessary to give effect to the rights recognized in the present Covenant.” Article 25 of the ICCPR provides the clearest stipulation for a genuine election, stating, “Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions mentioned in article 2 and without unreasonable restrictions: ... (b) To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors;...”

Since the EC admits the existence of a crisis regarding election management, and thinks it should be solved by the parties rather than by the Commission, a boycott by

party nomination—the EC failed miserably to ensure a level playing field or fair polls. Examples of this include the mayoral elections of Rangpur and Cumilla, and the parliamentary by-poll of Gaibandha. There's little doubt that the political crisis is not the EC's lone problem; the Commission also suffers from deficiencies in credibility.

Another glaring example of the EC's incompetency is the recent hosting of current and former top election officials from Saarc countries at the EC. Shockingly, the real host was not our Commission, but a much discredited election observer, Abed Ali, whose organisation—the Election Monitoring Forum—was screened out by the EC only a few months ago from the list of approved local observers.

These election officials from our neighbouring countries, however, have suggested that our EC has all the power it needs to hold a free and fair election. It has never been doubted that the EC is adequately empowered under the law, but the Commission's partisan application in favour of the party in power has made the institution controversial. Unfortunately, seemingly, the EC's independence has already been lost.

LAKSHMIPUR-3 AND BRAHMANBARIA-2 BY-POLLS

Is this the model for the 2024 national election?



Shamsuddoza Sajen is a journalist and researcher. His X handle is @shamsud_doza

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

On November 5, 2023, the world witnessed a new record in election fraudulence when a polling agent from the ruling Awami League managed to stamp 43 ballots over a mere 57 seconds, equivalent to an astonishing 45 ballots per minute. The 57-second video of the incident has swiftly gone viral on social media. In response, Bangladeshi netizens, witnessing a recurring pattern of blatant frauds in nearly every election under this regime, have channelled their frustration through sarcasm. One prevailing quip suggests that if the individual had channelled his talent towards cricket, particularly considering the lacklustre performance of the Bangladesh cricket team at the ongoing World Cup, he could have achieved greater fame than the renowned speedster Shoaib Akhtar.

Jokes aside, the by-elections in Laxmipur-3 and Brahmanbaria-2 have once again laid bare the grim political reality of Bangladesh, all while the country is just about two months away from its national election. Both by-elections were tainted by numerous irregularities, such as the expulsion of agents representing opposition candidates from polling stations, open voting, fake voting, and the

stuffing of ballot boxes. Notably, these transgressions were orchestrated by members of the ruling party. For example, the individual whose video went viral was a former vice president of the Chandraganj Thana committee of the ruling party's student wing. He had been expelled from the committee due to a breach of party discipline. However, his prior expulsion did not deter his participation as a polling agent for the ruling party's candidate.

What do these glaring instances of electoral fraud reveal about the often-repeated assertions by ruling party leaders that they have restored voting rights to the people? If both the aforementioned polls had been conducted correctly, the ruling party's stake would have remained unscathed, even in the event of an opposition victory. There are no remaining parliamentary sessions for the new MPs to participate in. Furthermore, it's worth noting that the opposition candidates did not represent BNP, but rather the ruling party's ally, Jatiya Party and some other minor parties. In the case of Brahmanbaria, the Jatiya Party candidate called for the cancellation of polling at seven centres, alleging widespread ballot-stuffing by members of Awami League.

In Lakshmipur, both Jatiya Party and Zaker Party candidates boycotted the by-poll, citing allegations of vote-rigging by Awami League activists. Unfortunately, the ruling party appears to be consistently disregarding these concerns.

The performance of both the Election Commission and of the government officials responsible for overseeing these elections has been equally exasperating. The returning

If the by-polls in Lakshmipur-3 and Brahmanbaria-2 serve as a blueprint for the 2024 election, Bangladesh stands on the precipice of an existential threat—one that endangers the foundational principles of the state and the achievements it has made over the past five decades since independence.

officer for the Lakshmipur-3 by-polls initially refuted all allegations of electoral fraud. It was only after the 57-second video went viral that he issued a letter to investigate the alleged irregularities. On the other hand, the returning officer for the Brahmanbaria-2 by-poll adamantly denied any irregularities, despite clear evidence of the contrary. We are

eagerly anticipating the response of the Election Commission and the chief election commissioner regarding these incidents.

Amidst widespread national and international appeals for free, fair, and participatory elections in Bangladesh, the ruling party—along with its loyal state apparatus—has orchestrated yet another farce in the name of holding elections. This reveals the hollowness of their frequently repeated promises to conduct the upcoming national election impartially. If they cannot establish their impartiality in overseeing a simple by-poll, questions are bound to arise about their commitment to maintain fairness during the impending high-stakes national election.

The deeply flawed 2014 and 2018 elections have not only eroded the integrity of the Bangladesh state across all its facets, but have also cast a lasting shadow on the country's international reputation. If the by-polls in Lakshmipur-3 and Brahmanbaria-2 serve as a blueprint for the 2024 election, Bangladesh stands on the precipice of an existential threat—one that endangers the foundational principles of the state and the achievements it has made over the past five decades since independence.

In a civilised world, few crimes surpass the injustice of depriving a people of their fundamental right to select their representatives and self-govern. In the case of Bangladesh, this offence is particularly indefensible, given the bloody war its people waged to secure their right to self-determination. The ruling party should not forget this.