

Are we running in circles?

The only way out of a controversial election is dialogue

We are deeply disappointed that what we feared has ultimately prevailed—an election timetable announced by the Election Commission (EC) in the glaring absence of a consensus among the major political parties over polls-time government. As the Awami League and its allies brought out celebratory processions all over the country, BNP and allies rejected the schedule, while the Left Democratic Alliance as well as the Gonotontro Moncho also denounced what they believe would be a sham of an election. Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibul Awal may well hope that the upcoming polls will be “free and fair, impartial, participatory... credible and praised at home and abroad,” but we would be living in a fool’s paradise if we believed that such a scenario is possible under these strained circumstances.

Following the controversial elections of 2014—in AL won 153 seats uncontested—and in 2018—in which widespread irregularities and ballot stuffing took place—there have been repeated calls at home as well as from outside to hold a credible election. The government, unfortunately, seems to believe that holding an election under any circumstances is a “win” for the ruling party, wilfully ignoring that another discredited election will do irreparable damage to its own image and destroy whatever remains of our democratic institutions and aspirations. In the lead-up to the election, when it should have demonstrated its commitment to the democratic process, including upholding the opposition’s constitutional right to freedom of assembly, the Awami League chose the path of retribution, arresting over 10,000 BNP activists and leaders, many on false or trumped-up charges. These actions, alongside the incendiary rhetoric from the top leaders of the party, have foreclosed any possibility of a dialogue.

BNP, on the other hand, has also remained stubborn in its refusal to even attend a dialogue unless its one-point demand for the resignation of the government is met. Such an uncompromising stance, however legitimate the party may have felt its demand was, has not borne fruit and instead led it to a point of no return. At least 117 vehicles have been burnt all over the country from October 28 till November 15—during its blockade programme—and even if it claims to have played no part in the arson attacks and violence, it must ultimately realise the trap it is setting for itself by going down its chosen path. As a party that professes to speak for the people, it also should not ignore the loss of lives and livelihoods of people during the worst economic downturn the country has faced in decades.

Even the CEC himself, in his televised speech to the nation, has admitted that if conflict and violence take place due to differences, instability can be created, which will have a negative impact on the election process. He must also realise that calling upon voters to go to the polling stations with “enthusiasm, courage, and confidence” during such a political climate is mere rhetoric. The CEC has once again urged for dialogue among the major political parties—a call which we wholeheartedly endorse.

However, the EC cannot simply put the blame on the parties for not attending dialogues without playing an active role in ensuring a level playing field for all. Thus far, the EC has maintained that its hands are tied regarding the mass arrests of the opposition until the announcement of the schedule. Can we now finally expect it to play its due role? If it wants the confidence of the major political parties, especially the opposition, the EC, whose track record is questionable at best, must do the hard work itself. After two consecutive controversial elections of 2014 and 2018, Bangladesh simply cannot afford another discredited election.

We must improve our human rights record

Govt should promptly start working on UPR recommendations

In the latest Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a mechanism of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to take stock of the human rights situation in its member states, a total of 301 recommendations have been made to improve Bangladesh’s human rights record. This comes at a time when the country is engulfed in deep political tensions with the national election less than two months away, punctuated by protests by RMG workers for a fair minimum wage. Naturally, these and other related issues featured in the analysis of our rights situation.

Some of the major recommendations made by UN member states included conducting a free, fair and credible national election, amending the Cyber Security Act (CSA), ensuring freedom of expression, ensuring all ILO-recognised rights of the workers, ratifying additional treaties and conventions to deal with the cases of enforced disappearances, and holding independent and transparent investigations into them. Bangladesh is supposed to review these suggestions and declare its decisions before the 55th session of the UNHRC in February next year.

Our human rights situation has been increasingly under scrutiny in recent years, with many national and international organisations criticising the government for curtailing freedom of expression and the media. Many journalists, human rights defenders and civil society members were victimised under the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA). While the government enacted the CSA replacing the DSA, experts allege that there is not much difference between the two.

Additionally, incidents of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings by law enforcement agencies have harmed our image abroad, yet the government has done little to bring the perpetrators to book. Meanwhile, three RMG workers were recently killed as police opened fire on them when they were protesting for a liveable minimum wage. Then there is the government clampdown on BNP members following the events of October 28, which has led to the arrests of around 12,000 leaders and activists, according to the party. Only the other day, three UN officials expressed their concern over the sharp rise in political violence.

Under these circumstances, there is no option left for the government but to work hard on addressing various abuses of human rights in the country. To that end, the first step is taking the UN recommendations seriously and showing some improvement before the next UNHRC session.

Polls schedule is not a cut-off point for dialogue

Without talks, another one-sided election is all but certain



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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The polls fixture unveiled by the Election Commission (EC) on Wednesday—setting a January 7, 2024 date for the 12th parliamentary election—has triggered a number of predictable reactions. Within hours of the announcement, scores of vehicles were vandalised and/or torched, including three compartments of a train. Citizens were seen scurrying off to the safety of their homes. BNP and like-minded parties rejected the fixture, announcing fresh protest programmes. The EC, still suffering from the proverbial ostrich syndrome, recommitted itself to the goal of a fair election while hoping that all the unresolved issues would somehow disappear. Equally banally, ruling party activists brought out celebratory processions followed by *khichuri* treats, as if they were just handed tickets to the front row seats of a Taylor Swift concert.

If election pre-season had a face, it would be radiating with myriad emotions at the moment, with fear, anger and jubilation all on equal display. Or, if you’re into sports, think of this as the beginning of a semi-final match running up to one decisive, live-or-die final game. The general secretary of Awami League is certainly thinking in those terms, having won—in his own words—the quarter-final played on October 28, when the BNP held a rally demanding, unsuccessfully, the resignation of the government, only to see about 10,000 of its leaders and activists taken off the streets through arrests—cases hanging overhead—or jail terms.

For those scurrying off to safety, of whom I was one, the polling date announcement certainly came with a sense of foreboding. It felt like pouring gasoline on a smouldering fire, and that can only mean more violence and unrest down the road, claiming not just lives but also livelihoods of ordinary people. It also pushed any chance of political reconciliations through dialogue further away. Obaidul Quader has all but confirmed it when he said there was no time for a dialogue anymore. Ever the lover of metaphors, he alluded to a train that has left the station, “What can we do if they [BNP] do not get on the train? The electoral train waits for no one. When the train leaves, it does not and will not stop [for anyone].” The foreign minister went a step further, warning that the government cannot



Bangladesh Army personnel in a military vehicle drive through a street adorned with election posters near a polling station in Dhaka, on December 30, 2018.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

be deterred by threats of US sanctions, and that anyone trying to obstruct the election will be “punished.”

As things stand, it is difficult to ignore the stark parallel between the situation now and what happened in the lead-up to the 2014 election. The political environment then was as explosive as it is at present. The polls schedule then was also announced amid a nationwide blockade by BNP, which had duly rejected it. There was widespread violence around that time. The government heavily cracked down on the opposition. And international mediation attempts fell by the wayside. Finally, the election ended with almost all major opposition parties boycotting it, 21 people killed on election day, and with 153 Awami League candidates or allies elected unopposed—giving the party a landslide victory.

Is this how the 2024 election is also going to play out?

The Awami League seems to have learnt from the distasteful aftertaste of 2014—but it’s not the lesson you’d want it to learn. Given the notoriety that unopposed elections bring, the ruling party is hoping that there will

and “continuation of the democratic process,” as it was done in 2014, and again in 2018 (which too was boycotted midway amid a vote-rigging bonanza).

For a party that has survived overseeing the bloodiest election in Bangladesh’s history—and the widespread condemnation of major international players like the US, UK, the European Union, and the United Nations—it may suit Awami League to be confident in the face of renewed pressure and potential sanctions from the US, especially after receiving the purported backing of our closest neighbour. But given how bad the situation has turned, how fragile the economy is, and how desperate citizens have become for relief from the unending tensions, it suits all parties involved to consider less confrontational options.

The fact is, dialogue is still our best way out of another bloody election and shamefully low voter turnouts. The election schedule, which ideally should allow for time to prepare for the polls, doesn’t mark a cut-off point for political reconciliations. Saying so is naive at best, and dangerous at worst.

major political parties resolving their differences.

The apparent lack of effect of some of our international allies trying to bring Awami League and BNP together for dialogue has been frustrating, of course. Perhaps it’s high time we realised that we must look inwards for a solution. BNP feels that the responsibility to create an environment for dialogue lies with the Awami League. We cannot help but agree. It’s a historic responsibility/burden that has accrued over 10 years of violent and discredited elections. But both parties, including BNP, must also be willing to compromise on their stances to the degree possible, even if it means going off the book for a mutually agreeable solution.

Nothing is set in stone—neither the polls schedule, nor electoral conventions, nor even the constitution. What matters more, and what the constitution also advocates, is that people are able to vote in a free, fair and credible election. This is where the ultimate test lies. And in the coming days, Awami League—as the party in power—will be judged based on its performance in this regard.

The ‘Karar Oi Louho Kopat’ controversy



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When poet Kazi Nazrul Islam was alive, he told many of his friends to record his songs using their own dexterity in rendition. They were allowed to use their own style of singing (or *gayaki*), but he insisted on keeping his tune intact. His angry statement when someone took too many liberties with his song was, “I should be recognised in my song, do not stam pede it with your lorry.” The stam pede happened. And it happened in a film titled *Pippa*. *Pippa* is an amphibious vehicle which was handled by a chivalrous Indian soldier, Bahram Singh, leading to the victory of India over Pakistan in the 1971 war to liberate Bangladesh. In the film, when Bahram meets the Mukti Bahini soldiers, they are singing *Karar Oi Louho Kopat*. However, using AR Rahman’s composition and tune, the amphibious vehicle not only trampled the song, but also crushed its spirit.

In one of my own translations of the song (in my 2010 translation book *The Return of Laili*), I attempted this version:

“Those iron walls of prison
Break them! Remove them!
Bloodstained chains

*The dias of worship!
Oh young sun
Play the dangerous flute
Let the remains of the carnage
Fly over the walls of the prison gate...*

Written in 1921, after the arrest of Chittaranjan Das and recorded later by revered artist Girin Chakravarty, the song has a very powerful message against British rule. Nazrul had published this song in his book *Bhangar Gaan* even before he was taken to prison by the British government for his allegedly inciteful writings. When Chittaranjan Das was arrested, his wife Basanti Debi sent their son, Sukumar Ranjan Das, to ask for a poem from Nazrul Islam. They met at the office of *Upasana* magazine. Comrade Muzaffar writes, of this song, that a few of them were chatting loudly while Nazrul had his face turned to the wall and took a few minutes to write this poem. He then read it out to Sukumar Ranjan Das, who was very happy. It was around the same time that the poem *Bidrohi* had been composed, which was published in Nazrul’s *Bhangar Gaan* in January 1922.

The tune of *Karar Oi Louho Kopat*

is synchronised with the lyrics, which has been a specialty of Kazi Nazrul Islam, who has written and composed more than 3,000 songs under 16-17 genres. This particular song is Kazi Nazrul Islam himself. It is not only a revolutionary song, but has inspired millions of Bangladeshis for decades.

During the War of Liberation, *Karar Oi Louho Kopat* was broadcast by Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. The repeated rendition of this song brought great inspiration to the freedom fighters. Famous Nazrul exponent Shaheen Samad, Ziauddin Tariq Ali, Dr Naila Khan, Luba Mariam, Bipul Bhattacharya and Debabrata Chowdhury were featured in Tareque and Catherine Masud’s documentary *Muktir Gaan*. Any researcher can see the original tune used and the impact it had on the Mukti Bahini. The makers of *Pippa* could have chosen singers with prior experience of rendering Nazrul Islam’s songs. The new tune, which does not do justice to the powerful lyrics of the song, was sung by rising stars Rahul Dutta, Tirtha Bhattacharjee, Pijush Das, Shrayee Paul, Shalini Mukherjee, and others. With due respect to the Oscar-winning composer, AR Rahman, some research should have been done prior to using the song in the movie. Even watching the *Muktir Gaan* documentary would have sufficed. But *Pippa*’s treatment of the Nazrul song is nothing less than sacrilege. I personally believe that the song should be taken out of the film, and the original song should be inserted in its place. One statement from the makers says that it is legally okay to add a new tune to

the lyrics, since they had some kind of agreement with Kalyani Kazi, with Kazi Arindam present. But our sadness persists, despite the apology.

Ananda Samarakoon of Sri Lanka wrote the country’s national anthem. According to close sources, two words from his original text being changed led to his suicide. The song originally started with “*Namo Namu Matha*,” but its beginning was changed to “*Sri Lanka Matha*” without the poet’s permission.

To get a sense of his character, one incident may be cited. Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam felt wounded when his wedding to Nargis Ara Khanam was based upon a clause which he had to abide by. Nothing could restrain him, and eventually he broke out of the marriage and wrote to his father-in-law:

“I have willingly taken on the role of a beggar. But I shall not tolerate being kicked around because I am not a small fry or a heartless person. I feel so crushed by the horrible behaviour meted out to me and that too by people of close proximity.

“Just pray that this error is soon remedied.”

In a Facebook post, freedom fighter Akku Chowdhury has also written about the story of *Pippa*. According to him, if the film has been made for the sake of art, then the win of India over Pakistan and the justification of the war may be fine. To quote him, “If the movie maker is interpreting the Liberation War of Bangladesh, we should all be worried.” Like him, I feel utterly disappointed. The amphibious vehicle duly brought victory to India, but the “*Pippa*” has crushed our hearts.