

Should time be an issue for dialogue?

We must give talks a chance to resolve political differences

No one remembers an election for its being held on time. A massive undertaking like election must go according to plan, following rules and a fixed timetable, but it is just so that a free, fair and credible election can be held. Confusing the means with the end is a cardinal error in strategy—it is also a recipe for disaster, as we have seen in 2014 and 2018. Yet, this is what Awami League again seems to be doing. It has reportedly responded to US Assistant Secretary Donald Lu's call for dialogue to resolve the political deadlock, saying "there is not enough time for holding any meaningful dialogue"—alluding to the recently-unveiled schedule that set a January 7 date for the next election.

On Thursday, a day after the polls schedule was unveiled, the party's general secretary also spoke in these very terms while dismissing the possibility of talks with BNP. He said: "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]." In its letter to Donald Lu, the party also claimed that it had "kept the door open" for unconditional dialogue but it didn't work because of BNP's unwavering position on the resignation of the government as a prerequisite for any talk or the holding of any election.

This is only half the truth, however. Firstly, the assumption that the polling date announcement somehow marks a cut-off point for attempts to reach political consensus through dialogue is naïve as best, and dangerous at worst. Is sticking to a timeline more crucial than addressing the fundamental concerns of a fair and inclusive democratic process? Or is it just an excuse for avoiding genuine engagement on the critical issues that remain unresolved? Secondly, how sincere has Awami League really been in "keeping the door open"? Has it reached out to BNP and other parties to work out a plan? Has it sent any official invitation? If anything, it has sent mixed signals all along, sometimes acknowledging the importance of dialogue as a concept and sometimes ruling out the possibility of talks with "arsonists" and "murderers". Its arguments—now resting on polls schedule—have clearly evolved with time, which is frustrating.

Awami League's commitment to a free and fair election necessitates actions aligned with these principles. And that, right now, includes making greater efforts to engage with the opposition.

Indifference is killing our canals

Cumilla EPZ authorities must answer for pollution of canals

Given the speed with which our rivers, canals, and other water bodies are being grabbed or polluted, it may appear as if we are in some kind of a sick competition to destroy them. Every day, we are bombarded with news of influential people and institutions harming the lifelines of the country—not just big rivers but also the canals running through cities and towns. According to a recent report by this daily, the canals in Cumilla Sadar south upazila have been facing such onslaughts for some time now.

The problem has been traced to untreated industrial waste from the Cumilla Export Processing Zone (Cumilla EPZ) being discharged into at least five canals. As a result, some 70,000 people of 50 villages have lost their livelihoods. In the past, when the water of the canals was clear, it could be used for irrigation, fishing and other household purposes. But now the water has turned black and foul and is destroying crops while the fish population has also depleted. Two of the canals have already lost their navigability and shrunk due to deposition of industrial sludge.

The question is, why are the Cumilla EPZ factories discharging untreated waste into nearby canals despite there being a Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) since 2014? It has been alleged that EPZ authorities often keep CETP operations suspended. What is the point of setting up a CETP if it cannot serve its purpose? Why is nothing being done despite the immense sufferings of local people?

Like these canals in Cumilla, there are countless others in the country that have been facing the same existential threat due to grabbing and indiscriminate waste disposal. The canals of Dhaka are perhaps the worst example in this regard, but those in Chattogram and other major districts are in no better shape. We have seen how the Chaktai canal in Chattogram was reduced to a narrow strip over the years. These filled-up water bodies are why many cities go under water even after a moderate rain. We, therefore, urge the authorities to revive at-risk canals by stopping illegal waste disposal.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Improve Dhaka traffic now

The growing number of private cars on the streets is a major factor behind the worsening traffic congestion of an already congested Dhaka. In the past, on many occasions, authorities have assured the city dwellers of taking action to prevent this issue turning severe, such as by providing bus services for schools, building designated parking lots, trying to encourage citizens to use public transport, etc. But most of these have not been fully or even partially implemented. There is no justification for such procrastination by city authorities. They must work better to combat factors contributing to Dhaka's traffic problem.

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EDITORIAL

Can we trust the EC at all?



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Events leading to the schedule announcement of our 12th parliamentary election appear to be eerily similar to those before the previous two much discredited and disputed elections. This time, apart from serious disagreements among the most potent challengers centring the election management process, the Election Commission's consistently inconsistent statements and decisions show that it lacks the courage and capacity to act decisively and independently. Otherwise, Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibul Awal's address to the nation would not have been full of contradictions.

CEC Awal admitted that "the EC has been noticing differences among the political leadership regarding the polls, particularly on the issue of the institutional system of elections," and that "consensus and solutions are needed," but announced the voting schedule without any resolution of the disputes. He then expects the nation to trust him when he says, "We believe the upcoming polls will be free and fair, impartial, participatory, and peaceful."

He said, for a free, fair, inclusive, and festive election, there is a need for a conducive political environment, but leaves the responsibility for creating it on the parties entangled in an existential fight. He again contradicted himself when he said "... if conflict and violence take place due to differences, instability can be created, which will have a negative impact on the election process," but in the same breath urged the people "to go to polling centres in festivity and exercise their voting rights freely, keeping aside all concerns, anxieties, and discomforts." The CEC then reminded the nation that "meaningful competition is an essential element of an election," but didn't explain how the next election could be meaningfully competitive without participation of the ruling party's main challenger and several other political parties.

Such inconsistencies are nothing new. The EC has repeatedly said one thing and did something other than that, if not the opposite. A more disturbing trend has also emerged, in which we see the EC secretary cancelling out the CEC's observations. The most recent one is secretary Md Jahangir Alam's assertion a week ago that a conducive environment to announce the schedule of the next general election exists, though the CEC in his address to the nation decreed its absence and urged all parties to reach a consensus. One may wonder



The CEC left the responsibility for creating a conducive political environment on the parties entangled in an existential fight.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

whether the CEC would exercise his authority over the administration and replace the secretary who is clearly out of line. Former election commissioner late Mahbub Talukder's book, *Nirbachonnam*, bears the testimony of how the EC secretariat served its political masters instead of the constitutional body.

Other events that have proved the EC's inability and partisan behaviour towards the ruling party include its failure to deal with gross irregularities in local government and parliamentary by elections, granting registration to two unknown and dubious parties, declining registrations for a number of well-known parties on shallow grounds, and entertaining discredited election observers associated with the ruling party—who brought in fake foreign observers—and enlisting them as local poll monitors despite earlier rejection. These events suggest that the EC is either giving in to pressure from some powerful quarters, or it lacks the required skills and independence to regulate the crucial elements of a genuine election.

Ignoring substantial opposition to holding a one-sided election, the EC

has argued that it has a constitutional obligation to hold the election in time. However, the commission has conveniently forgotten that it also has a constitutional obligation "to ensure effective participation of the people" (Article II in Part II of the constitution, under the title "Fundamental Principles of the State Policy"). Footnotes in the most updated version of the

Parliaments, which offers a new approach to measuring parliamentary capacity, resilience, and performance. It devised 25 indicators to evaluate the parliament's own strengths and weaknesses, and one of those indicators is electoral integrity. In judging the electoral integrity, IPU sets the criteria as such: "In practice, elections take place regularly. A

significant proportion of citizens participate in these elections. Elections are competitive and citizens' fundamental rights are respected before, during and after election day."

Rescheduling the national election is neither impossible nor without precedence. It was rescheduled, though by seven days only, in the not-too-distant past, in 2018. If parties can agree on the way forward, buying some additional time for holding the election is also possible, as the counting of 90 days can begin afresh if the parliament is dissolved. It is true that the history of dialogue between the two archrivals—Awami League and BNP—is an unhappy one, but there were exceptions, too, such as during the 1991 amendment for returning to the parliamentary form of government.

It may sound superstitious, but the day fixed for voting is a Sunday, the same day of the week the last two sham elections—January 5, 2014 and December 30, 2018—were held on. The last time the people in Bangladesh freely voted was not on a Sunday, but on a Monday. We need a genuine election, not another sham one.

Digital banks will bring a revolution in Bangladesh



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TANVIR A MISHUK

Recently, I watched the Bollywood blockbuster *Jawan* and one particular act stayed with me long after I walked out of the cinema.

The act, which was most definitely drawn from real-life incidents in India, involves a farmer's suicide after bank officials publicly dehumanised him for not being able to repay a Rs 40,000 loan he had taken out to buy a tractor at a 13 percent interest rate. While cinematic liberties were taken, episodes of hounding borrowers are not uncommon in Bangladesh, either.

For vagaries of life, farmers, fishermen or, for that matter, any small rural trader has to borrow money at some point. These are people who do not have a bank account but need access to credit and means of payment. And they are customers that traditional banks do not absorb because they do not pass the more complex credit checks.

So, they turn to loan sharks, who tend to charge a daily interest of 40 percent. As it goes, these people then

borrow afresh to pay one loan shark and thereby get stuck in a vicious cycle of debt. Often, they end up losing everything.

Now, imagine if one company sets foot in the ring, offering them loans at an affordable single-digit interest rate. That would be a gamechanger for this outsized, underbanked population. And this is the main reason why Bangladesh is moving towards digital banks.

Those in this industry want to take banking services to the grassroots, which has long been underserved by mainstream financial service providers.

For digital banks, it would cost next to nothing to extend services to a customer. Plus, the need for no physical branch means no unnecessary expenses. Their strong unit economics mean that digital banks would be able to provide collateral-free loans at single-digit interest rates.

As much as half of the economy is informal, and in the current scenario,

only a digital bank can help bring the interest rate on loans to an acceptable position. We want to take the obstacles out of banking and make it available at one's fingertips.

Being involved in the sector, I was fortunately at a position to have pointed out the necessity of a digital bank in Bangladesh in 2020. It is now gratifying to see that the Bangladesh Bank has acknowledged this need and granted approval to two entities. Undoubtedly, digital banks can play a pivotal role in materialising the government's financial inclusion agenda, offering a convenient and cost-effective solution for grassroots individuals.

Once the digital banks are launched, poultry vendors at bustling hubs like Kawran Bazar and even vegetable growers in rural villages will be brought under the banking umbrella. Farmers will no longer have to turn to loan sharks if they need money to buy tools and machinery or for any personal emergencies.

A reasonable question to ask at this point would be: can a digital bank actually pull all this off? We take great inspiration from the Brazilian digital bank Nubank, which has sparked a financial revolution in a country with one of the world's most bureaucratic banking sectors, which had left swaths of the population excluded.

Nubank was founded in 2013 by David Velez—a Stanford-educated Colombian—as an issuer of credit cards

that charged no annual fee, operating in the digital world.

To appreciate how radical Nubank felt to Brazilians, consider what used to be the onerous process of acquiring a credit card through a conventional bank. It required braving long lines at a brick-and-mortar location, heavy documentation in tow. People with no credit history had trouble qualifying.

Velez designed Nubank to offer consumers its no-fee card via an online application. No credit history? No problem. Card users' limits start small, but as a record of paying back debt is established, these limits grow. Building a credit history is beneficial for cardholders as, for those who pay off their balances every month, the card is a hassle-free, no-cost convenience.

Brazilians took to Nubank like a duck to water; and in just five years, it became a decacorn, a \$10 billion company.

In Brazil, Nubank has evolved into a full-service financial institution, providing personal loans, savings and business accounts, and insurance and investment products—all via its smartphone app.

By keeping the underbanked at the front and centre of the plans, and by focusing on customer service, data science and innovation, digital banking aspires to pull off the same feat in Bangladesh and ultimately reinvent what banking means to the masses.