

Electoral lip service can't hide ugly truths

Ongoing treatment of opposition camp deeply alarming

The Human Rights Watch (HRW) has raised questions about the ongoing systematic efforts to “quash the opposition and eliminate competition” ahead of the upcoming general elections in Bangladesh. In its report, the HRW has highlighted how mass arrests of opposition activists and politically motivated prosecutions have been leaving prisons overcrowded, and the justice system strained. Over the months, we have also expressed our concerns regarding such developments as well as pretrial detentions and rushed trials/convictions—all equally troubling. That these are being done with the election in mind is quite apparent.

Recent days have seen a number of alarming revelations and accusations. While the HRW noted the arrest of almost 10,000 opposition activists, the BNP said at least 16,625 members had been arrested since October, including most of its key leaders. BNP also claims that about half of its five million members “face politically motivated prosecution.” Over the last three months, according to a *Prothom Alo* estimate, some 584 BNP leaders and activists have been sentenced, many in absentia, in at least 34 cases in Dhaka. November 20 alone, according to a report by this daily, saw the conviction of 112 leaders and activists in Dhaka and Rangpur—the highest in a single day. They were accused of unlawful assembly, obstruction of police work, vandalism, arson, and so on.

Meanwhile, the party office in Nayapaltan remains locked for a month. Reportedly, what was a vibrant space filled with activists before and on October 28, the day BNP held its ill-fated rally, now lies empty, with leaders and activists fearing being arrested should they make an appearance. The simultaneous abandonment and continued heavy guarding of the central office of the main opposition party further symbolise the shrinking of political spaces in the country. What's more worrying is the likely effect of this suffocating environment: with the opposition camp nearly incapacitated, it essentially eliminates any viable challenge to the ruling establishment and makes the possibility of a fair and credible election all but impossible, as the HRW has also suggested.

Against this backdrop, how much credibility does the electoral lip service being continuously paid by the Election Commission hold? Recent reports suggest that with the organisational capabilities of BNP severely weakened, Awami League is “looking” for rivals in so-called independents, “dummy candidates” and rebels—the very people it once derided—to give its expected win a veneer of legitimacy. This only confirms suspicions about an effort to compromise the integrity of the election.

We remain deeply worried about the larger fallout of this state of affairs. A free and fair election is vital to establish people's power and the rule of law and accountability. The aspirations of a nation cannot be sacrificed or compromised for the parochial interests of a few. We, therefore, urge the higher authorities to respect the desires of the people and ensure that they find a way back to political reconciliations and a smooth democratic transition.

Take steps to check dengue, air pollution

High Court's observations about relevant authorities demand attention

Air pollution and dengue are undoubtedly among the biggest health threats facing residents of Dhaka, and other major cities, at present. While air pollution is causing about 20 percent of the total premature deaths in Bangladesh, dengue has also become one of the major causes of deaths over the past few years, with 2023 emerging as the deadliest in terms of both infections and deaths. However, the responses of the relevant authorities in checking both these threats have been surprisingly minimal. Against this backdrop, we find the High Court's criticism of the Department of Environment (DoE) and Dhaka city corporations for failing to make meaningful interventions quite deserved.

Over the last few years, the apex court has issued several directives about taking steps to prevent air pollution. In January 2020, it asked the DoE to shut illegal brick kilns in Dhaka and four surrounding districts. However, such brick kilns are still running on the outskirts of the city and elsewhere, with the authorities doing little to prevent it. Besides, other major sources of air pollution—including fumes from vehicles and construction dust—have also not been checked. The result is, Dhaka continues to be ranked as one of the worst affected cities in the world in terms of air pollution. Its air was “very unhealthy” even yesterday morning, with an air quality index (AQI) of 207. A recent study has found that on average, each Dhaka resident has to spend about Tk 4,000 a year for diagnosis and treatment of symptoms likely caused by polluted air, which is alarming.

Meanwhile, dengue has become almost invincible across the country, with 1,610 deaths recorded so far this year. It has long spread to all 64 districts, with more than two lakh people already infected outside the capital. While the city corporations have failed to prevent the spread of the virus, hospitals in general were also not prepared to provide treatment to the large number of incoming patients. We observed with shock how our health system failed the poor and vulnerable when it came to dengue treatment. This is unacceptable.

We, therefore, urge the relevant authorities to take High Court's observations with due seriousness and urgently take steps to contain the double whammy of air pollution and dengue. They must produce results, not just rhetoric about their efforts.

CITIZENS, ELECTIONS, DEMOCRACY

The Bangladeshi conundrum



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Elections are a fundamental aspect, if not a pre-condition, for a democratic polity. However, while a democracy is not possible without an election, the simple fact that one has been held is no guarantee that democracy has been established. One of the greatest ironies for Bangladesh is that, though it has held elections with some degree of regularity over the last few decades, democracy has remained halting and elusive.

In fact, while elections elsewhere are typically occasions for demonstrating and reinforcing the spirit of constitutionalism, the rule of law and the supremacy of the people's will, elections in Bangladesh expose our gradual slide into an Orwellian universe which is simultaneously absurd and dangerous.

The age-old notion of “politics” as public service, for establishing the “common good,” where “popular sovereignty” is upheld through a peaceful and transparent electoral process, has become increasingly irrelevant to the political dynamic here. Elections have become a desperate struggle through chicanery, intimidation, manipulation, violence or “whatever means necessary” to somehow get or keep power. It is not an occasion to be celebrated or for introspection, but a time of uncertainty, anxiety, and dread for the very people, the masses, that elections and democracy are supposed to serve.

Several concerns about the impending elections, or democracy in general, become apparent. First, major political parties do not view each other as opponents, but as enemies—or even as existential threats. There is a hyper-polarised and toxic environment where confrontation rather than persuasion has become the norm, and the rhetoric and actions of the major parties have become increasingly intolerant, aggressive and threatening. They are prisoners of their own exclusive and alienating narratives, and the elections are approached as a gladiatorial contest rather than political competition. Citizens are justifiably worried about the credibility of such elections and acceptability of the results.

Second, that uncertainty has been exacerbated by the fact that the last two elections were woefully inadequate in satisfying people's democratic expectations. This time, too, the perceived lack of autonomy of the Election Commission (EC), its weaknesses revealed in local government and parliamentary by-elections, its arbitrariness in party accreditation decisions, its wasting of almost a thousand crore taka in



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PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

getting EVMs which it cannot use, and its premature announcement of the election schedule, all sharpens that scepticism.

Added to that is the question of the huge number of political parties that exist—44 registered with the EC, and many others which are not. Most lack organisation, ideals or policy platforms, and merely represent a loose clustering of sycophantic individuals around a professed leader. These typically surface during election time jockeying for alliances and coalitions which are temporary, opportunistic, and cynical.

Even the dominant parties do not set an example by practising internal democracy: party elections or conventions are seldom held, and leadership patterns are determined by dynastic logic and nepotistic arrangements that are unchallenged and inviolate. None of this is conducive to sustaining the people's confidence in democracy.

Third, there are some systemic dysfunctionalities. This is reflected in one party's absolute control of the parliament (almost 90 percent belonging to one party), which robs it of its debate and oversight functions, and the dominance of business interests in the House (more than 60 percent of elected representatives define themselves as such), which compromises its broader considerations and obligations. Moreover, the parliament remains totally subservient to executive authority, leading to an unholy conflation of leader-party-parliament and state.

The independence and moral

authority of the judiciary is also jeopardised because of its perceived organisational vulnerabilities, and the fact that partisan conflicts and physical skirmishes can flare up within the vaunted premises of the Supreme Court. Moreover, the courts are undermanned and overwhelmed with more than five million cases in the docket with

evolving situation here. The US has sought to influence the process through its insistence on dialogue and inclusiveness, ensuring the integrity of the elections, and shrewdly using US visa restrictions to nudge the process, fully aware that access to the US is crucial to the dreams and aspirations of a significant segment of the

thousands of others (including “ghost cases”) added every day.

Even the universities, traditionally considered to be the bastion of progressive activism, thoughtful debate and optimism about the future, have been turned into cesspools of moral rot, intellectual stagnancy and fascist impulses.

Fourth, there is an apparent contradiction between “progress” (measured in clinically quantitative terms) and “development” (which has some “quality of life” factors associated with it). Thus, on the one hand, some focus on the obvious and impressive economic growth expressed both in terms of various social indicators and through several dazzling infrastructural projects.

Others point to these severe democratic deficits, erosion of civil liberties and human rights, curtailing of free speech, increasing levels of crime, corruption, pollution, inequality, unemployment, inflation, loan defaults, and foreign exchange crisis.

The resulting discourse, framed in either-or binaries, is predictably contemptuous of the “other” and has contributed to confusing the public and confounding its political expectations.

Finally, international tensions and geopolitical gamesmanship have also complicated matters. India has historically been active in preserving and extending its interests and controls in Bangladesh, and its political prejudices are, and have been, quite evident.

Recently, great power rivalries have also cast a shadow over the

Bangladeshi elite (as a preferred place to park their children, their wealth and, when necessary, themselves). This newly-discovered eagerness to spread democracy is wholly inconsistent with its history in Latin America, or its efforts to “force people to be free” in the Middle East.

However, China and Russia have also gained considerable salience through economic, technological and project assistance they have rendered, and dangle tantalisingly. The conflicting interests and claims of these countries have introduced an additional level of fluidity and uneasiness into the situation (it must be pointed out that nothing flatters the colonised sensibilities of the Bangalee ego more than the feeling that they are considered important by the great powers).

Consequently, even though transparent, participatory and competitive elections are a constitutional right, the realities today have vitiated those expectations. Instead of serving the people, the parties appear to be holding them hostage to their own overriding agenda of self-promotion and self-protection.

The “spring of hope” we had experienced about 50 years earlier is gradually drifting towards a “winter of our despair” currently. Dickens was locating his novel in pre-revolutionary France with indications of radical developments later. The situation he described may well apply to Bangladesh today, and the outcome it led to, as Hamlet would say, is “a consummation devoutly to be wished.”

What Bangladesh and UK can achieve through COP28



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The year 2023 is a year of unprecedented climate change. Temperatures in Bangladesh have climbed, and wildfires have raged across North America and Southern Europe. India, China, Europe and North Africa have experienced devastating flash floods. In the UK, temperatures in September and October were the highest in 120,000 years. The need for urgent action has never been clearer. We need strong and meaningful partnerships.

Bangladesh and the UK agreed to work together at COP26 through our COP presidency and Bangladesh's role as the chair of Climate Vulnerable Forum. We co-hosted an event that highlighted the experiences of many climate-vulnerable countries. This helped to reaffirm the urgency of climate action and put pressure on big emitters to commit to greater emissions reduction. In March this year, UK's Minister of State for Indo-Pacific Anne-Marie Trevelyan and Bangladesh's State

Minister for Foreign Affairs Md Shahriar Alam cemented this partnership by signing the Bangladesh-UK Climate Accord. This partnership is built on mutual trust. As equal partners, we are engaging in policy dialogue, sharing expertise and leveraging opportunities. We are committed to working together bilaterally but also in international fora.

Delivering this accord includes sharing our experience of climate policy and legislation, including on assessing national climate risks. We have also agreed on a new programme to protect climate-vulnerable communities and critical ecosystems in Bangladesh, particularly in the Sundarbans and Hakaluki Haor. Through our partners, the Global Centre on Adaptation, we launched the Global Hub on Locally Led Adaptation to support communities with access to knowledge and finance, and showcase the amazing work that Bangladesh is leading. But while

action at home is vital, we also need to keep the pressure up internationally.

The UK's new White Paper on International Development puts poverty reduction and climate change at the centre of our work and outlines new ways of working with countries like Bangladesh that better reflect their development trajectory and aspirations. Beyond COP28, we will continue and expand the Bangladesh-UK climate partnership. For example, we plan to strengthen links between academic institutions in the UK and in Bangladesh, and support more young climate activists to get involved in policymaking.

COP28 starts on November 30 in Dubai. This is an important opportunity for our partnership to deliver our shared priorities on the international stage. Our countries have a common interest in stepping up climate action for the sake of future generations. COP28 must deliver and lead to a step change in scale, pace and ambition. Most importantly, we want to help rebuild the trust that has been eroded by countries not living up to commitments, either on emissions reduction or on finance.

The UK has the following priorities for COP28:

Keep 1.5 degrees in reach: We are committed to reducing our emissions in line with our Nationally Determined Contribution. But it is vital that all

countries agree to ambitious new commitments and action to keep global temperature rise under 1.5 degrees Celsius, or this year's extreme climate impacts will be just the start.

Action on adaptation: We want COP28 to deliver progress on the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) and agree on a framework for enhancing adaptive capacity, strengthening resilience, and reducing vulnerability to climate change. This means increasing the amount, quality and accessibility of adaptation finance with a focus on those most in need.

Progress on loss and damage: The UK wants to see progress on operationalising the Loss and Damage Fund and the Santiago Network for Loss and Damage, ensuring that they both deliver effectively for vulnerable countries.

Finance, finance, finance: We agree it is vital that countries deliver on their commitments to mobilise climate finance for developing economies, including that of reaching the \$100 billion climate finance goal this year. Private finance will also be key.

These will not be easy to achieve, and there will inevitably be trade-offs—as with all multilateral negotiations. But we must aim high. We look forward to working with all partners at COP28 to ensure we advance the climate agenda and put words into action.