

A big earthquake may not be a distant risk

But why are we still so complacent?

Every time we have a tremor that jolts us like the one on December 2 (which had a magnitude of 5.6), we have reports on how unprepared we are to cope with a major earthquake, as has been predicted. In fact, this year Bangladesh experienced almost 100 quakes, most of them minor jolts with 3.0 to 4.5 magnitude and five of them of 5 magnitude or above. The latest one was the biggest in 25 years. Dhaka is close to a geological fault line, and being so densely populated with unplanned construction almost everywhere, it is likely to face catastrophic consequences if hit by a major earthquake.

A researcher of Dhaka University has told this paper that a mega shock (of more than 8 magnitude) is almost inevitable. He has urged the government to initiate short-term programmes to educate the public on how to survive an earthquake and lower the damage during a convulsion. The government should take such cautions and suggestions seriously, and take steps accordingly. These should include funding first responder teams, mobilising volunteers trained to assist in rescue efforts, and equipping the Fire Service with the required machinery and skilled human resources to carry out operations in the event of an earthquake.

At the same time, Rajuk must take steps to ensure that buildings that are at risk of collapsing are vacated and demolished or retrofitted to make them safe. According to a *Prothom Alo* report in April, Rajuk had identified 42 highly risky buildings under its jurisdiction with 23 in Dhaka, three in Gazipur, six in Savar, eight in Narayanganj and one in Keraniganj. But only one has been demolished. Who will take the initiative to demolish the remaining buildings? And why has Rajuk not published the list of risky buildings which could have raised awareness?

Rajuk also cannot shrug off the responsibility for enforcing building codes to ensure buildings are resistant to earthquakes and have required safety structures, such as fire exits. Unfortunately, over the years, we've seen indiscriminate urbanisation with buildings being constructed in every space available, defying the codes and creating congestion, sometimes even blocking exit-entry routes. Bangladesh is known for its efficient disaster preparedness when it comes to cyclones and floods. The same level of strategic planning is required for earthquake-prone areas, especially Dhaka.

The government must consider these realities and develop emergency response strategies involving local communities and the various organisations involved. It must also rigorously enforce building codes and demolish all risky buildings if they cannot be saved through retrofitting. It is almost impossible to predict an earthquake, which makes it all the more crucial to be prepared for one at any time.

It's still a man's world in elections

Extremely low number of women candidates is a wake-up call

Since the restoration of democracy in 1991, the reins of the government have always been in the hands of a woman (except during the state of emergency in 2007-08). Yet, women's participation in politics has been frustrating and often largely ceremonial, as highlighted by the number of women who have contested national or local elections over the last three decades. That trend, as things currently stand, is likely to continue in the upcoming 12th parliamentary election as well. As a report by this daily shows, only 128 female candidates are set to contest the election from 99 seats—for a 300-seat parliament—making up a measly 4.71 percent of the total 2,713 candidates approved by the Election Commission.

This is not just disappointing but also worrisome in terms of fair representation on the political stage. The Representation of the People Order (RPO) stipulates that political parties should ensure that 33 percent of all their committee posts are held by women, including in central committees. Yet, our political parties have repeatedly failed to meet this obligation. In this male-dominated domain, women politicians seldom get proper support or encouragement, in yet another manifestation of our still largely patriarchal society.

The reigning theory seems to be that male candidates get preferences over their women counterparts because men are generally more popular, hence likely to win more votes. Thinking along this line, instead of working towards changing negative public perceptions so that a candidate's merit, sincerity and records of public service are judged, makes it harder for women to seek leadership opportunities. In our current political climate, the matter of safety is also a big issue. One may recall incidents of sexually violent attacks on women voters after the 2018 election. Not only voters, but sometimes sexual violence has been used to intimidate women candidates as well. Such attacks, as well as lack of a conducive environment within party structures, have had the effect of discouraging many voters and potential candidates. Against this background, how can we ensure the participation and representation of women in politics?

The political instability that we are currently witnessing, with BNP and other like-minded parties rejecting the election, is unlikely to be resolved soon. But even then, as the president of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad put it, a conducive environment is a must to increase women's participation in polls. Unless the political parties and the Election Commission bring necessary reforms/changes in how things presently are, it is all but certain that we are going to have another election where one half of the country's population will remain woefully underrepresented.

Placing dummies as alternatives disenfranchises voters



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It's now clear that the 12th parliamentary election will largely be a contest between the official nominees of the Awami League and those who have been declined nomination by the party. Officially, there are about 30 registered political parties in the race, but most of their participation can be better described as token representation. Even the total number of nominees from the three much-hyped parties—Bangladesh Nationalist Movement (BNM), Trinamool BNP, and Bangladesh Supreme Party (BSP)—could not equal the 300 seats that are up for grabs.

Apart from propping up these three “king's parties,” there have been several attempts to break up and weaken the opposing BNP and its alliance, who have been mounting street agitation for over a year, demanding a reintroduction of the caretaker government for overseeing the upcoming parliamentary election. But such attempts, including bringing in General Ibrahim's Kalyan Party to the electoral race, didn't incur a meaningful dent in the opposition camp.

Then came a bigger surprise. Shahjahan Omar, one of the vice-presidents of BNP implicated in a case of arson and violence for the disturbances caused on October 28 along with dozens of other senior leaders of the party, was allowed bail 24 hours before the closing of nominations. The climax involved a letter from the prime minister to the Election Commission, nominating Omar as the ruling party candidate for one of the seats in Jhalakathi.

Shahjahan Omar's Awami League ticket, however, raises some serious questions regarding the judiciary's role given that all other co-accused or indictees of similar charges have been denied bail and remain in prison. There's little doubt that his freedom was part of a deal reached during his

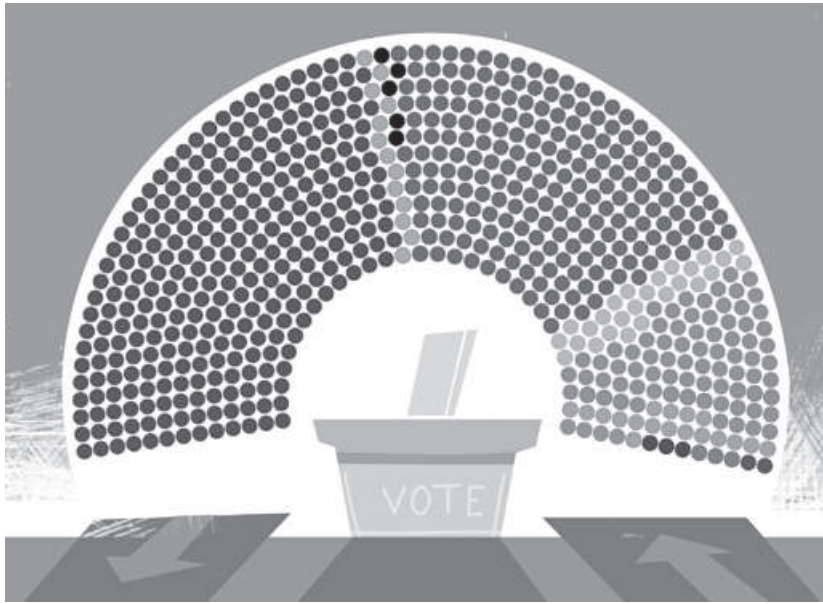


ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

captivity. It also suggests that other leaders in BNP, especially those in prison, faced similar pressure which is unacceptable in a democracy.

Can AL now deny that Shahjahan Omar's nomination is an admission that he is a formidable and winning candidate? Isn't it also an admission that other senior leaders of BNP, who have been more prominent than him, are also election winners, and that's why poaching them from BNP or removing them from competition was necessary for AL to hold on to power? Would AL now admit to its efforts to create a national alternative of BNP for the election?

We are witnessing an engineered intra-party contest as most of the independents, too, belong to the ruling party. This paper, under the headline “Not quite independent,” reported last week that the candidates deprived of AL's nomination would also need the party's approval to become independent candidates. The report

quoted the ruling party's General Secretary Obaidul Quader, following widespread declarations by hundreds of aspirants for party tickets, while media reports said that the PM wanted to make the election competitive by allowing party members to run as independents. These party-approved independents are better known as dummy candidates. But placing

of the ruling party (including a few Islamist parties), too, tried to maximise their participation in the election, raising their combined total to nearly 500.

This pattern is akin to that in all other polls held under the current EC's supervision as almost all of them were battles between party/ally nominees and rebel candidates, with a handful of exceptions. All the encouragement and enticement offered to other parties and BNP rebels to join the fray proved to be a mere exercise of showing the elections as being participatory.

This huge number of dummies, however, has become a new worry for the ruling party as about 70 of them are sitting MPs and many others hold significant influence in their respective constituencies, in their own rights and owing to their long-held party positions. Some of these dummies could eventually upset many senior leaders of the ruling party and its allies. Hence, prior authorisation has been made mandatory for AL members in order to become an independent candidate. Reports of administrative coercion and harassment of unauthorised candidates have already surfaced from various corners of the country. In one such incident, an upazila unit functionary of AL was taken and kept detained for several hours at a police station in Dinajpur.

Amid growing pressures—largely from international partners—for a free, fair, and participatory election, many observers now think that the government wants to make the election appear competitive and free to show that BNP has committed another blunder by boycotting it. However, such a strategy could backfire if an unusually large number of independents are elected. It could allow disgruntled allies and party rebels to gang up and form a powerful block, causing a larger split in the ruling alliance.

The EC's sudden move to shake up the lower echelons of the civil administration and police, despite its earlier refusal to do so (citing potential chaos), is indicative of making the contest somehow credible. Since the competition has already become a largely one-sided affair, it could be claimed that it has been done according to the wish of the government, and not independently by the EC.

Hochemin Islam, our constitution, and ‘cisterhood’



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Hochemin Islam, a prominent transgender rights activist, was set to speak at “Women's Career Carnival” on November 24 at the capital's North South University (NSU). However, the event, hosted by NSU's Career and Placement Center (CPC) and organised by Heroes for All and iSocial Limited, did not finally have Islam on board.

The decision to not allow Islam to speak was preceded by protests from a faction of the university's students. Through a formal “Letter of objection and notification about Criminal activity as per Bangladesh penal code chapter 16 article 377 inside our NSU campus and the Promotion of Homosexuality (Transgenderism & LGBTQIA+) on November 24, 2023,” they sought to highlight that bringing Islam in would be illegal as it would incite outrage of religious feelings. The NSU authority finally decided against bringing her in, citing concerns regarding her safety.

In reality, Islam was going to speak on how the needs and vulnerabilities of marginalised communities could be mainstreamed into policies governing different facets of the labour market. Neither was she going to speak in favour of homosexuality, nor would she have spoken on sex reassignment methods (assuming that this is what the offended section of students was implying with using the word “transgenderism”). In any case, NSU was not right to succumb to the protests carried out by a group of students who did not quite know what they were doing.

But would NSU have been in the right if Islam had spoken on either

or both the issues mentioned above? Section 377 of the Penal Code, 1860 is a controversial colonial holdover, inconsistent with rights of sexuality-variant individuals. On the other hand, “transgender” is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth, and encompasses sex-reassigned and intersex individuals, among others. Hijras, too, arguably come within the purview of having a transgender gender identity. Our labour market and built infrastructures marginalise both the gender- and sexuality-diverse population, alongside cis women and persons with disabilities. Everyone but able-bodied cis men virtually remain as fringe dwellers within the built environment in many respects. Hypothetically, even if a speaker wanted to share their views on the issues at hand, and even if those views stood in misalignment with the views of a group of students, NSU should have stood firm in allowing the speaker to speak.

While the students have every right to raise their voice if they perceive something as unbecoming, the onus lies on institutions who have a constitutional obligation to uphold the fundamental rights of the citizens (even the so-called private or non-state actors cannot shy away from constitutional obligations, especially when they undertake functions essentially of public nature, as per decisions of the apex court). The decision against bringing in Hochemin Islam was disproportionate to meeting the goal (that is, of ensuring her safety) sought to be achieved, and violative of

the very essence of her constitutional right to nondiscrimination and freedom of speech and expression. At this stage, one may bring up the potential conflict between Islam's rights and the rights of the students. The students did exercise their constitutional rights by raising voices against bringing Islam in as a speaker. However, if anyone intends to view curtailing her rights in furtherance of

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realising their own, then that would be a distorted interpretation of how rights really work.

Earlier this year, gender-critical feminist Dr Kathleen Stock was invited by Oxford Union despite strong opposition from trans activist student groups. While many students and teachers at Oxford disagree with Dr Stock's views, she was allowed to speak; interestingly, while Stock was speaking, a trans activist glued herself to the debating chamber close to her chair. While the nature of the NSU protest shows how much we lag behind in terms of having the right knowledge and information, there is still a thread of similarity between the two incidents. Speech was perceived as intimidating in both cases. However, while Oxford Union stood firm in its decision of allowing Dr Stock to speak, NSU could not ensure the same for

Hochemin Islam.

One factor that somehow went missing in the discussions is that Islam had been invited to speak for and on behalf of “women.” Indeed, in terms of marginalisation, cis women and gender-variant people are comrades in arms. In certain contexts, gender-variant people become all the more vulnerable due to lack of recognition, access to essential services and goods, and lack of deliberative freedom. It is therefore important that gender-variant individuals speak alongside cis women and share their stories of oppression, subjugation, and intersectional discrimination in order to strengthen the narrative against gendered hegemony and dominance.

As part of second-wave feminism, “sisterhood” became an oft-used term to describe feminist solidarity against patriarchal oppression. In contemporary times, some feminists are showing commitment to biology to define women's solidarity, unmindfully giving sustenance to heteronormative “cisterhood.” In a way, this cisterhood assumes a form of crude “cisterarchy” (combining cisterhood and patriarchy), as it tends to exclude gender-variant people who face equal degrees of patriarchal oppression.

Instead of welcoming the initiative of the organisers of inviting Islam to speak at a women's career event, NSU authorities silenced marginalised voices and also crippled the alliance between cis women and gender-diverse individuals. Unknowingly, this gave sustenance to cisterarchy, too—as if only cis women were allowed to speak on behalf of cis women.

The project of fundamental human rights originated and developed as an androcentric project, privileging a masculine worldview. Contesting “androcentrism” became the feminist assertion for women's human rights. However, at present, it is crucial to critically interrogate whom the term “women” does and does not refer to, and who in fact has the authority to decide on both respects.