

Rivers can’t be saved without honest efforts

Govt offices must overcome their inadequacies to play a bigger role

Among the many discrepancies that mark its governance records, Bangladesh has had to contend with a unique reality in which we have a globally recognised climate champion in our PM, but the misfortune of seeing her words repeatedly fall on deaf ears when it comes to protecting our rivers. On Monday, the PM again made an impassioned appeal to save rivers, stressing that rivers are to Bangladesh what veins are to the body. She also instructed relevant departments to prioritise integrated projects to restore the navigability of all rivers and canals in and around Dhaka.

Will her directives be properly followed this time? There is no guarantee that they will, if the past is any indication. We have seen a similar lack of impact following such instructions and warnings by the apex court as well. If the expressed sincerity of the highest authorities were enough to stop river pollution and encroachment, Bangladesh would long have ridden itself of this scourge. The question is, why is it so hard to move from expression to implementation? Is it because of a lack of proper follow-up? Is it because of deeply entrenched systemic issues stalling progress? Is it because of any collusion between politically linked river killers and state officials? Is it because of the lack of accountability? It can be all of the above.

The fact is, due to the persistent failure of the relevant authorities as well as a lack of awareness, most of our rivers are at risk of decay or death. At least 56 rivers are currently suffering from “extreme pollution” due to indiscriminate waste disposal. Whereas pollution was confined to rivers surrounding megacities like Dhaka and Chattogram before, it has now spread to every part of the country. This has had a devastating effect not just on rivers’ biodiversity and navigability but also on the health and livelihoods of those dependent on them. Our rivers have also been routinely subjected to encroachments and other illegal practices such as sand mining.

To prevent this collective “rivercide” is no easy feat. But we must try, for our own survival. Given the multidimensional threats facing rivers, the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC), with little executive power, cannot be solely responsible for it. What’s needed is a collective effort by the various government departments and agencies dealing with rivers and river lands. We urge all to understand the urgency of taking meaningful actions to save our rivers.

Our soil is losing precious nutrients

Concerted efforts needed to improve soil health, ensure food security

In a country struggling with challenges on multiple fronts, soil health deterioration may seem like an insignificant issue. But the fact is, if left unaddressed, it can be just as challenging and impactful. Our food security, health and well-being all depend on soil to a large extent, yet our indifference to this issue has resulted in a massive degradation of soil quality.

According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, the health of 76 percent of the country’s soil has deteriorated over the past decades. Every year, an average of 27,000 hectares of land are being degraded. Researchers have identified five major reasons behind it: deterioration of soil chemistry; soil erosion; lowering of water tables and drought; waterlogging and soil compaction; and loss of biodiversity. The question is: how do we address these factors?

With the ever-growing population, the pressure on Bangladesh’s soil is also growing. In the 70s, rice production stood at 1.20 crore metric tonnes, but now it has increased to 3.8 crore metric tonnes. High production has been made possible by using modern varieties of paddy, smart irrigation methods, and also increasing use of fertilisers and pesticides. But this also caused the soil to lose necessary nutrients. A study conducted in 2020 found that 79 percent of our soil is deficient in essential organic matter, which is alarming. This means the food we are growing and eating also lacks necessary nutrients.

Besides, industrial pollution and topsoil removal are reducing the ability of soil to grow crops. Additionally, our soil is losing productivity due to acidification, which has affected 54.8 percent of the land, and arsenic contamination, which has affected 30 percent of the land. Then there is the increasing level of salinity in the soil of the coastal region.

What all this shows is the multidimensional threats facing our soil, and for that, we must prepare accordingly, on multiple levels. We urge the government and concerned departments to take this issue seriously and adopt a comprehensive national land use policy to save our soil from further deterioration.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Noise pollution during election

In a disconcerting revelation, our capital city Dhaka has found itself at the pinnacle of global noise pollution, as per the 2022 report released by the United Nations Environment Programme. The escalating noise pollution, particularly in the context of the upcoming national election, is a cause for significant concern. Excessive use of microphones during election campaigns has been a long standing issue, contributing substantially to the overall noise pollution. The detrimental impact of this noise pollution extends beyond mere inconvenience; it poses a severe threat to both physical and mental health. It is crucial for the Election Commission to address this issue promptly and take necessary steps to regulate the use of microphones during election campaigns.

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Expediency triumphs over principle in electoral politics



THE STREET VIEW

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One twist after another is unfolding as the political plot thickens in the lead-up to the general election slated for January 7. All elections have some common features, such as polarisation, efforts to split and weaken the opposition camp, emergence of smaller parties as important factors, etc. But the upcoming election has three unique aspects that have not been seen in Bangladesh before. That all these have emerged in the context of sustained international attention—with an apparent division among the international quarters (that are influential in Bangladesh) over the election—make these unique aspects all the more interesting.

First, a significant part of the international quarters expect a free, fair and participatory general election this time as the last two elections have been anything but that. Whether it will be free and fair, one cannot yet predict. But what can be predicted with a fair degree of certainty is that BNP, the political opposition on the field, will not take part in the election. Neither will a few other smaller parties—both left-wing and right-wing.

BNP refusing to join the polls was always a possibility, and so the ruling Awami League needed a solid contingency plan to pass the election off as participatory. It has become clear that it plans to do that through independent candidates. For the first time in the country, a political party is encouraging independent candidates to run against its own nominated candidates. It is very likely that the independents are rebels from within the Awami League who are breaking ranks after being rejected a nomination; only this time, they are not causing bitterness and will very likely be welcomed into the party’s fold if they end up winning. However, this is going to be the feature in some selected constituencies. So, although it will be like Awami League insiders are facing off against each other, the election should appear participatory, and even vibrant, if not completely free and fair.

Second, till the last date of nomination submission (November 30), everyone kept an eye on BNP and the newly formed “king’s parties” to see who were quitting and who were participating in the election, affirming Awami League’s claim of inclusive elections as well as a crumbling resolve of the BNP. When Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader said in his typical lilt, “Those who were worried as to

who will participate [in elections] and who won’t... flowers have started to bloom... there’s nothing to worry... more flowers will bloom. Hundreds of flowers will bloom before the nomination submission deadline,” it caused many to sit up and observe more attentively.

Unfortunately—for the Awami League, at least—instead of hundreds of flowers, they could land only one big fish. Former BNP leader Shahjahan Omar walked out of jail and fell directly into Awami League’s embrace with an election nomination. That is a

indicating that his case was serious. But then suddenly he was granted bail on the day before the nomination submission deadline. Omar walked out of jail, secured a nomination from the ruling party which, till now, seems as good as an electoral victory and five years of MP ship.

Awami League’s willingness to prioritise expediency over principles is evident in this specific case. Omar’s supposed allegation of arson seemed to not matter at all, although the prime minister, also the president of Awami League, said, “I think the hands they use to set a bus on fire should be burnt immediately.” This only demonstrates how allegations and charges could vanish, the legal system could oblige, and law enforcers could become accommodating at the bidding of the ruling party to secure its political ends. Surely it was a relief for the BNP as no other big shots left the party. BNP leaders claimed it a victory against the government’s

participatory, and went to play the proxy role of a cosmetic opposition in parliament. It was a great service to the ruling Awami League at that time.

Since then, Jatiya Party’s character and role has been dubious, flip-flopping among staunch allies, estranged friends and jilted opposition. Raushan is known to be loyal to the ruling party, but when she needed its support, it seems the Awami League gave her the cold shoulder. A media analysis quoted a party leader as saying, “The prime minister had praised Raushan madam so many times in parliament for her contribution to making the parliament effective. But the bitter truth is that Raushan did not get the PM’s appointment to resolve the nomination-related crisis in [Jatiya Party].”

Raushan was always in favour of the election while Jatiya Party Chairman GM Quader was against it. But Quader secured absolute control over the



ILLUSTRATION: **BIPOB CHAKROBORTY**

serious show of appreciation since the ruling party is not considering many other faithful allies for its nomination. There was a rumour that many BNP leaders would join the polls leaving the party; perhaps that’s why Quader said “hundreds of flowers will bloom” before the nomination submission deadline. There were 17 in total—BNP followers from different levels, but none from the top tier except Omar and adviser to BNP chairperson Syed AK Ekramuzzaman.

Shahjahan Omar’s case deserves a deeper examination. He was arrested for arson on November 4 and remanded to police custody,

repression and oppression. They also said Omar’s case exposed how the government controlled the judiciary and also its plan to split the BNP.

The third feature concerns the Jatiya Party. The party’s chief patron, Raushan Ershad, is not in the electoral race due to an internal feud. This is the first time since she was first elected MP from Rangpur-3 in 1996 that Raushan is not participating in a national election. When Jatiya Party Chairman HM Ershad was against joining the 2014 election, Raushan took part in it along with some party men, providing the Awami League the ability to say that the election was

party and ousted Raushan loyalists. And this time, the ruling party did not come as a saviour for Raushan. This also evinces the point that in this game of politics, expediency wins over traditional values.

As mentioned above, all these features are unique to this election, never seen before in the country. It is impressive how the Awami League has opted to take this route without hesitation. However, it appears that all its enterprise revolves around the next election, not considering longer-term ramifications for the party. Only time will reveal the nature and extent of said ramifications.

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The most pervasive human rights violation

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It is with both a sense of purpose and profound sadness that we pen this op-ed for the 16 days of activism to end gender-based violence (GBV). Purpose, because eliminating violence against women and girls is important for the future of Bangladesh, for its progress and sustainable development. Profound sadness, because we have so far to go, and we are progressing so very slowly.

Data shows that almost three in four married women in Bangladesh report experiencing violence in their own homes, a place that should be a safe haven. Half of Bangladeshi girls are married before the age of 18, and 84 percent have experienced sexual harassment. Sixty percent Bangladeshi women consider public transport one of the most unsafe places for them. In the current digital era, technology-enabled online violence and harassment is disproportionately affecting younger women, as well as transgender and gender-diverse individuals. The climate

crisis is exacerbating intersecting vulnerabilities. We hear of an increase in violence against women and child marriage as a result of climate-related displacement, extreme weather events, and interrupted livelihoods.

Violence against women and girls remains the most pervasive breach of human rights in the world, a barrier to development, and a threat to peace and security. It knows no boundaries of age, race, religion or social status. Globally, it will take another 286 years to achieve gender equality, according to the Gender Snapshot Report 2022. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on Gender Equality seems like a distant dream. But this isn’t only about SDG 5; no country can progress if 50 percent of its population feels unsafe, disempowered, discriminated against, and unable to make choices and meaningfully engage and contribute. All the SDGs are at risk.

This year’s campaign focuses on scaling up investments to eliminate gender-based violence. As the UN family, we are supporting the

Government of Bangladesh and civil society on both prevention and response. We want to share four urgent priorities:

First, a strong, effective, and supportive legal framework is critical. The Government of Bangladesh has made commendable efforts in putting in place a strong normative framework and continues to expand on these efforts. We applaud the Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs for their initiative to amend the Domestic Violence Act, and to articulate a law on prevention of sexual harassment. Implementation and monitoring of laws on elimination of violence against women is just as crucial. Effective enforcement and accountability mechanisms must be part of the investment along with relevant disaggregated data collection.

Second, preventing GBV requires investments in the transformation of harmful social norms and practices. It is essential to allocate resources for planning and implementing interventions that address the root cause, such as transforming power dynamics and challenging social norms that perpetuate gender inequalities. Without adequate investment in prevention efforts, the high prevalence of GBV will persist.

Third, we require comprehensive and effective survivor-centred and age-responsive quality care for survivors

of violence. Services for women and girls experiencing violence can be the difference between life and death. The role of law enforcement and medical professionals—including doctors, community health and social workers—is critically important in ensuring quality care. They must work in seamless coordination with the law enforcement and justice system actors to support survivors.

Fourth, investing in Bangladeshi women’s organisations is important. Globally, under one percent of gender-focused state aid is directed to women’s organisations. Going forward, the Bangladesh women’s movement must be adequately funded and supported. Bangladeshi women’s rights organisations have a powerful history, and they have always been at the frontline of service delivery and advocacy. There is more proof than ever that violence against women and girls is preventable. Evidence shows that the single most important driver of policy change is a strong and autonomous women’s movement.

Investments are not only about funding, but also as much about where we place our attention. Let us pay attention to the issue of gender-based violence not only throughout these 16 days, but throughout the year, every year. Let us collectively push forward to end violence against women and girls once and for all.