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Onion prices soaring Find alternative import sources to check skyrocketing prices

There seems to be no getting out of the unending nightmare that is the rising prices of essential commodities. In the latest development, onion prices have nearly doubled overnight, rising from Tk 140 a kg on Friday to Tk 240-250 a kg on Saturday. The reason, apparently, has to do with India's decision to extend the duration of the \$800 per-tonne price floor for onion export to Bangladesh till the end of March next year. As the news broke out, traders here began stockpiling what onion was available, driving prices to insane levels.

It's interesting that whenever an announcement like this comes out of India, the first response from local traders/importers is stockpiling products, creating an artificial crisis, and thus manipulating prices. This time, too, they cut down onion supply to make profits, according to a leader of the clearing and forwarding agents at Bhomra land port in Satkhira. For years, we have repeatedly witnessed the same pattern but failed to address it every time.

While a crisis may naturally occur sometime after an import restriction, it doesn't have to lead to a collapse of all market controls. How can traders then so blatantly disregard government-fixed caps on prices of essentials, including onions, which they have done frequently in the recent past? Reportedly, the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection launched a drive on Saturday, raiding 57 onion markets across the country and fining 133 entities a total of Tk 666,000. Considering that previous government attempts to control prices have borne little fruit, we remain sceptical about the effectiveness of the ongoing measures to drive down prices without reining in the syndicates as well as ensuring uninterrupted onion supply.

Given the political instability ahead of the general election, some level of uncertainty in the market is expected. But an abnormal price surge is completely unacceptable. As well as strict enforcement of price caps and punishing errant traders, the priority right now is finding alternative sources for import of onions and resolving the persistent Letter of Credit (LC) crisis. The government also must critically examine the role of relevant state departments whose oversight failure has led to the current debacle. It must undertake necessary reforms so that ordinary citizens, especially the poor and low-income groups, are not burdened with unnecessarily inflated prices every now and then.

Cyberviolence is rising Coordinated response vital to protect female internet users

It is alarming that so many women and girls in Bangladesh still encounter violence in the cyberspace, including sexually suggestive comments, explicit pictures sent through messaging platforms, trolling, etc. The prevalence of such crimes, as flagged by experts at a recent seminar, means that existing safeguards are inadequate or not working properly. Victims who experience such assaults often suffer from mental trauma that in turn can affect every aspect of their lives.

It is, therefore, vital that we address the need for proper acknowledgement of cyberviolence as well as provision of robust support systems by those responsible. The gender digital divide is also a major factor that leaves women and girls vulnerable to such crimes. It is crucial that they have the skills to detect and prevent them by being better educated and skilled in technology.

The mental impact of such violence is immense, and can even lead to suicide and self-harm. We need appropriate policies, enforcement of existing laws, and support groups where victims can share their experiences and learn coping strategies. At the aforementioned seminar, a representative of the ICT Division mentioned that there are helplines to deal with such crimes, including one specifically for teenagers. But how many people know of such helplines, and how well do these helplines function? Do the victims get adequate legal redress? Are there professional counsellors to help with their trauma?

The government, in conjunction with the private sector and international organisations, should develop a comprehensive plan of action to target this crime and protect potential and actual victims. People must be made aware of the available services, which should be regularly monitored to assess their effectiveness. An adequate number of counsellors must be trained, while the police and other personnel must be made IT-savvy and gender sensitive. Most importantly, the state must prioritise preventing cyberviolence as it helps normalise a culture of violence, fear and misogyny.

Responsible investors can transform fashion supply chains



RMG NOTES

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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

In a world that is becoming increasingly conscious of the environmental and social challenges it faces, many investors are playing a pivotal role in reshaping the business landscape. These conscientious individuals and organisations are not just seeking financial returns, but also advocating for ethical and sustainable practices in the companies they invest in. Fashion and textile supply chains stand to benefit greatly from the rise of the responsible investor.

One of the fundamental benefits of responsible investors is their focus on sustainable growth rather than short-term profits. Short-termism has always been an issue in fashion and has arguably been one of the

root causes of environmental and social problems we see in fashion supply chains.

In contrast, by prioritising long-term success, these investors encourage companies to develop strategies that are not only economically viable, but also environmentally and socially responsible. This forward-thinking approach leads to the creation of businesses that are less susceptible to market fluctuations and better positioned for the long run.

Responsible investors often emphasise ESG (environmental, social, and governance) criteria when making investment decisions. By scrutinising these aspects, these investors help companies

adopt practices that reduce their environmental footprint, improve their relationships with stakeholders, and enhance overall governance. This not only benefits investors, but also contributes to the greater good by addressing pressing global challenges like climate change and social inequality.

Fashion and its supply chains can benefit financially from responsible investment. This is because companies that prioritise sustainability and ethical practices are more likely to attract a broader investor base. Responsible investors are not alone in their pursuit of sustainable business; an increasing number of mainstream investors are recognising the benefits of these practices.

This diversification of investors can offer numerous advantages to businesses. It can lower their cost of capital, reduce financial risks, and enhance their reputation in the market. Furthermore, a larger investor base means access to a broader range of expertise, which can help companies develop innovative solutions and navigate

complex sustainability challenges. Responsible investors can also be seen as the watchdogs of corporate behaviour. By investing in companies that uphold strong ethical and sustainability standards, they not only promote responsible business practices, but also help build and maintain a positive brand reputation.

In turn, a strong brand reputation can significantly influence consumer behaviour. Companies known for their ethical and sustainable practices are more likely to gain the trust and loyalty of customers. Moreover, such companies are better equipped to attract and retain top talent, as many employees are increasingly looking for organisations that align with their values.

Responsible investors also play a crucial role in encouraging innovation. By prioritising sustainability and ethical practices, they push companies to explore new technologies and business models that are more environment-friendly and socially responsible. This leads to the development of products and services that are not only better for

the planet but also more appealing to consumers. Investors who promote responsible practices often push for research and development in areas such as renewable energy, clean technology, and sustainable agriculture, which benefit society as a whole.

Sustainability is not just about doing good; it's also about managing risk effectively. Responsible investors recognise the financial and reputational risks associated with companies that disregard environmental and social considerations. By advocating for responsible practices, they help businesses minimise these risks.

For instance, companies that invest in environmentally responsible practices are less likely to face costly lawsuits, regulatory fines or reputational damage related to environmental violations. Similarly, those that prioritise fair labour practices are less exposed to controversies and boycotts stemming from labour disputes.

Responsible investors extend their influence beyond the corporate boardrooms and financial markets.

They create a ripple effect that benefits society at large. When companies align with sustainable and ethical values, they contribute to the betterment of society in numerous ways.

By reducing their carbon footprint, companies address climate change and promote a healthier planet. Ethical labour practices improve the livelihoods of workers and create a fairer society. Additionally, responsible governance practices enhance transparency and accountability, fostering trust in the business world.

Moreover, companies that engage in corporate philanthropy or support social initiatives make direct contributions to societal welfare. Responsible investors, by pushing for such initiatives, catalyse positive change in their communities and beyond.

As the world grapples with pressing challenges like climate change, social inequality, and environmental degradation, responsible investors are beacons of hope, as they can truly be transformative agents of change.

ELECTIONS WITHOUT CHOICE

A leaf out of autocrats' playbook



BLACK, WHITE AND GREY

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ALI RIAZ

In 1978, a book edited by Guy Hermet, Richard Rose and Alain Rouquie was published with an interesting title, *Elections without Choice*. The book drew some attention soon after its publication, but little did we know that, decades later, the notion of "elections without choice" would become so relevant to the world in general but more so for Bangladesh. As the country is heading towards an exercise that the incumbent is calling an election, it is imperative that we understand what is in the making.

The edited volume of *Elections without Choice* was an outcome of a research project initiated by the Committee on Political Sociology, composed of the International Political Science Association and the International Sociological Association. The editors quite rightly noted that political scientists deliberately avoid discussing non-competitive elections, because those elections do not meet the fundamental criterion of a liberal democracy. Not only did they underscore the need for understanding non-competitive elections, but also insisted that such elections are important in tracing the trajectory of each country.

The book was published at a time when the world was witnessing a gradual shift towards democracy, one country at a time. The Carnation Revolution in 1974 in Portugal and the death of Francisco Franco in 1975 in Spain started a wave, identified as the "Third Wave of Democracy" by Samuel Huntington in 1991. In the early days of democratisation, promoted by Western countries, it was assumed that an election was a key indicator of the political liberalisation process.

In the 1990s, with the demise of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, democracy proliferated globally. It was believed that democratic regimes would be the norm and there could be only a few holdouts of autocratic regimes. But within less than a decade, two features became evident. The first one was that elections by themselves do not demonstrate democratisation, because authoritarian regimes also hold elections that are manipulated. The second feature was the emergence of a new kind of regime, with some apparent democratic traits but which are essentially autocratic; they were called hybrid regimes.

Subsequently, these regimes, which often hold elections and win at ease, were described as "electoral authoritarianism." These regimes tend to hold regular elections, but these elections are engineered in a fashion that opposition parties have little to no chance to win. In both closed autocracy and hybrid regimes, these exercises are essentially "elections without choice." Consequently, the attention of political scientists and observers shifted to the "quality" of elections.

Evidence mounted in the 2000s that autocrats and rulers of the hybrid regimes manipulate elections. Election manipulation was not a new phenomenon. However, from the 1970s through the 1990s, manipulation of



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Election, in a tilted field, is already rigged in such a manner that it can deliver only one result.

elections was easily detectable: there was blatant rigging, which included capturing polling booths on election day and weapon-wielding party loyalists scaring voters away from polling stations and stuffing the ballot boxes.

But as these hybrid regimes emerged and the despots needed to have some semblance of legitimacy to continue their rule, rigging of an election took a different route. This is the period of regression of democracy, often described as "democratic backsliding," which political scientist Nancy Bermeo defined as "the stated debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy." These political institutions, Bermeo reminded us in an essay, include "all the institutions that enable people to formulate and signify preferences and then have them weighed by their elected representatives."

Two years after Bermeo's essay was published, a seminal book by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt published in 2018, titled *How Democracies Die*, unequivocally stated that sometimes democracy dies with a bang, with coups, quickly and forcefully. But lately it happens slowly, incrementally; "democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box." The would-be autocrats rise through the elections, and then they change the rules of the game. Levitsky and Ziblatt use the analogy of a football game. "To consolidate power, the would-be authoritarians must capture the referees, sideline at least some of the other side's star players, and rewrite the rules of the game to lock in their advantage, in effect tilting the playing field against their opponent." When they talk of a referee, in the political context, who are they referring to? "These include the judicial system, law enforcement bodies, and intelligence, tax and regulatory agencies," they write.

Election, in a tilted field, is already rigged in such a manner that it can deliver only one result—a victory for the incumbent. The manipulation of elections, Bermeo told us, is one of the three key features of democratic backsliding. But such manipulation is not like how the classical autocrats used to do it—blatantly. Instead, these

election to ensure a victory. This is how elections are held by autocratic regimes.

Since the 2014 election, none of these strategies have been in short supply in Bangladesh. That election was boycotted by the opposition, yet strategies such as packing the Election Commission, or harassing

the opposition, or changing electoral rules were used by the incumbent. In the 2018 election, another tool was added—keeping opposition candidates off the ballot—and this was done both by confining leaders and cancelling their nominations on flimsy grounds, making the candidates spend time at the courthouse, which has not been helpful to the candidates.

These have delivered victory, not only a hollow one but something more than that, if we borrow from Cheeseman and Klass: "so one sided as to beggar belief, exposing the ruling party to ridicule." The ruling Awami League has not, by any means, abandoned its 2014 and 2018 strategies, but instead has become further audacious. The violent crackdown on opposition since October 28, arrests of BNP leaders, convictions of BNP leaders and activists at lightning speed, and shutting down party offices are testimonies to the continuation of these strategies. They also show how referees have been captured.

But in search of a way to avoid the ridiculous situations of winning 153 seats unopposed in 2014 or winning 96 percent of seats with allies in 2018, and additionally to "play the international community," it has invented a new way called fielding "dummy candidates." The so-called "dummies" are candidates who belong to the ruling party but are contesting the election as "independents" with the approval of the party. Besides, the smaller parties, "king's parties," and individuals who have been cajoled or coerced into participating in the election, thanks to state apparatuses, would like to run under the symbol of the ruling AL.

Ironically, these have not saved the party from being a subject of ridicule, but made it more embarrassing for it long before a single vote has been cast. Importantly, all these have laid bare that the ruling AL is moving towards an "election without choice."

Autocrats use to manipulate elections: gerrymandering (shaping electoral constituencies to the incumbent's benefit), vote buying, repression of opposition, hacking the election, stuffing the ballot box, and playing the international community. Interestingly, while ballot box stuffing is the most effective strategy, considering the risk of exposure, often autocrats use other strategies ahead of