

Verifying candidates' affidavits should be mandatory

It is one of the best ways to prevent large scale corruption

The fact that the Election Commission does not properly verify the wealth claims of aspiring candidates, despite having the means to do so, is absurd and raises a number of questions about its true allegiance. The EC could use its inherent powers and ask the National Board of Revenue and Anti-Corruption Commission to verify the authenticity of wealth statements submitted by aspiring candidates and their affidavits—in which lying is punishable by up to three years in prison under the criminal law. Ensuring that individuals who could potentially come to power are honest and have integrity is the least the EC can do.

Lying in such a scenario would be extremely concerning and should automatically disqualify a candidate from potentially getting elected. It would indicate that the candidate has no respect for the rule of law they are meant to uphold and be restrained by. It is a given that someone who would lie about that is even more likely to abuse power to acquire more. It is, therefore, essential for citizens to have authentic information on how much wealth a candidate has and how they came to acquire it.

The fact that the EC has not ensured this over the years only raises scepticisms about whose interest it has been willing to serve.

Before coming to power, the Awami League in its 2008 manifesto pledged to “take effective steps against corruption” and that influential individuals would “have to disclose their annual wealth information” in a stern bid “to wipe out graft, unearned money, defaulted loans, extortion, tender manipulation, and muscle power.” But since then, every time the party strengthened its grip on power, it distanced itself further and further from that pledge. Parallely, the wealth of many of its candidates have surged exponentially and at a rate that is inconsistent with the state of the economy and the overall economic plight of the people at large. What this indicates is that politics has become an investment opportunity and a way of making fortune rather than a means to serve the people.

To put a stop to this, the EC must use every means available at its disposal to verify the wealth claims of candidates. A failure to do so only confirms its inability to serve the interest of the people and our democracy, over a handful of corrupt and powerful oligarchs.

Why couldn't we eliminate child stunting?

Govt needs an urgent child nutrition policy and budget

Bangladesh has set a target to become a higher middle-income country by 2031 and a developed country by 2041, but we wonder how that dream will come true when a large percentage of our children still remains undernourished. According to Right2Grow Consortium Bangladesh, around 28 percent children aged under five are stunted in the country, while 24 percent are underweight and 12 percent are “wasted.” A 2022 Unicef report ranked Bangladesh fifth among countries with severely malnourished children. Given the alarming statistics, we must ask: why have the government programmes undertaken in the past decades to reduce malnutrition among children failed so miserably?

According to the WHO, “stunting” means low height-for-age due to chronic or recurrent undernutrition, while “wasting” is low weight-for-height due to inadequate food intake or prolonged illnesses. Both stunting and wasting are usually associated with poverty, poor maternal health and nutrition, and inappropriate feeding and care in early life. So, to address them, a lot of other related issues need to be addressed.

First and foremost, the nutrition deficiency in women of reproductive age must be eliminated, because only a healthy woman can give birth to a healthy child. But a study conducted last year found that about 1.7 crore women, aged 15-49 years, suffer from malnutrition in the country. Moreover, the increasing number of child marriages taking place in the country means that we might see more babies born with low birth weight and nutritional deficiency. Therefore, to reduce the child stunting and wasting rates, our approach towards women's health and nutrition needs to change drastically, while child marriage must be stopped once and for all.

The government also needs to have a specific allocation in our national budget for nutrition. Reportedly, in the 2022-23 fiscal year, only 5.43 percent of our total budget was allocated to the health sector, with no specific allocation for nutrition. We would also like to know whether the ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF), which is rich in protein and micronutrients and developed by our scientists, is being used to treat children with acute malnutrition. If not, the use of it needs to be spread across the country. Last but not the least, the government needs to take a holistic approach to reduce the number of stunted children in the country.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Fix public transportation

Traffic congestion remains a persistent issue affecting our everyday life. Investing in and improving public transportation infrastructure can alleviate this problem. It promotes a more sustainable and efficient urban lifestyle. Currently, the buses are very unreliable, as there is no system that they abide by, and so, the government needs to regulate this sector as soon as possible. Let's prioritise the expansion and improvement of public transportation for efficient and green cities.

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When the ruling party does the opposition's work

THE STREET VIEW



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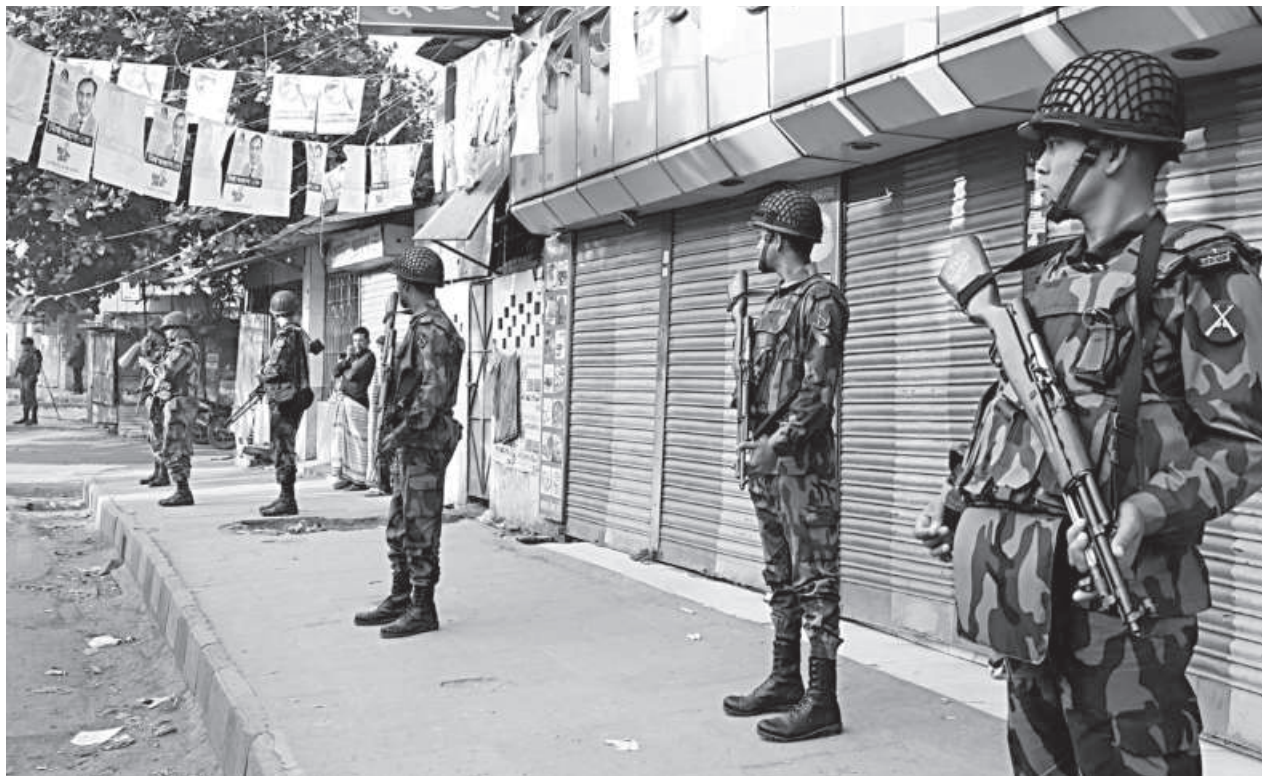
The January election has been the centre of attention for well over a year now. Everyone was curious how this edition would eventually pan out, especially whether BNP would finally be able to pressure the government into forming a nonpartisan election-time government, which is difficult, if not impossible. Some were just excited about the possibility of voting and it actually counting, unlike the last two elections. However, with BNP's boycott confirmed and seats distributed among Awami League's alliance, the results are almost a foregone conclusion.

Brig Gen (retd) M Sakhawat Hussain, former election commissioner, said this election is essentially a quest for an opposition party (read opposition in parliament). Although 27 parties are contesting in the polls, the search for a viable opposition remains the most prominent feature. The situation is so obvious that even someone without much political insight can predict that the ruling AL will form the next government with an absolute majority.

So, when the results are a foregone conclusion and winners are already known, the election has little significance. The results are predictable as the elections will be held under a range of restrictions.

The restrictions are an important issue here. The Election Commission asked the government to take measures so that no political programmes, other than for electioneering, can be held after December 18. In a letter sent to the home ministry, the EC said parties should be stopped from holding rallies and other public events that may “obstruct the election process and discourage people from casting their votes.” The measures should be in place till after the election on January 7, said the letter, addressed to the senior secretary of the Public Security Division.

It is the EC's role to ensure a congenial atmosphere for people to cast their votes freely. But the way the commission is stopping the activities of political parties is merely a bid to hide its failure through other means. This type of action had not been



FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

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taken by any EC, not even by the 2014 Rakib commission. But this is not unexpected, as the commission itself announced the election schedule amid high security and beefed up police protection, with the deployment of armoured personnel carriers and water cannons.

Basically, this level of security at the EC betrays the election's true nature and how congenial the prevailing atmosphere is. True, BNP and other opposition parties are enforcing hartals and blockades, demanding a nonpartisan interim government. But the political opposition is fully within its rights to demand and campaign to oust the government. Obviously, opposition parties will not support the government when elections come around.

But for the EC to also act as an extension of the political government and bar political programmes that

request. Just like casting votes is a right, so is not casting it. And so is waging a peaceful campaign to convince people not to vote at all. Since there is no “no vote” option, as there was in 2008, citizens may not feel compelled to vote. Thus, any campaign to discourage people from voting is as lawful as the urging people to vote for a certain candidate.

To complicate this further, in a television interview, ruling party leader and agriculture minister Abdur Razzaque said BNP received a number of generous offers. The party was even told that all its leaders would be released from jail overnight if it decides to join the January 7 election.

Distancing the ruling party from Razzaque's comments, AL general secretary Obaidul Quader, the very next day, said the remarks were not of AL's but that of the minister's alone. On the same day, Razzaque said, “I think what I said, I did not

say anything wrong, not a bit. The statement is correct.”

For a long time, BNP leaders have been accusing the government of politicising the legal system and imprisoning its activists and members illegally. Razzaque's statements only vindicate what BNP has been claiming all this time.

As BNP is not contesting the

The silent crisis of men's mental health issues

seeking help for depression or other mental health disorders. The entrenched societal norms further aggravate the situation. Men, bound by traditional gender roles, often find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of silence and suffering. The notion of asking for help is seen as an affront to masculinity, which deters many from seeking the support they

were men and 45.2 percent women. These individuals were admitted across various departments, yet startlingly, a mere 3.6 percent of them were referred to the psychiatry department.

Meanwhile, male depression is often undiagnosed due to a failure to recognise it, as it accompanies headaches, digestion problems, and irritability related to physical health

A recent study, conducted at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), illuminated that nearly half (48.4 percent) of the patients hospitalised at the institution were grappling with mental disorders, and out of this cohort, 54.8 percent were men and 45.2 percent women.

desperately need.

From a young age, boys are taught not to show their emotions but to repress them. As a result, men feel less comfortable about talking or sharing their feelings, which can cause conflict in their relationships and lead to severe mental health challenges. Another study indicated that factors like the inability to fulfil financial and intimate needs in marital relationships contribute to men's suicidal inclinations. Additionally, diminished self-esteem and a perceived lack of respect from others were associated with these tendencies.

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mental health issues, particularly among men.

Community-based initiatives can play a pivotal role in bridging the gap. Creating safe spaces where men can openly discuss their mental health issues, share experiences, and seek professional help is crucial. Online platforms and support groups can also provide an avenue for anonymous support, which might appeal to those reluctant to seek help in person. Integrating emotional literacy into the curriculum from a young age, and especially at the university level, is essential for fostering mental wellbeing. This initiative can help break down stereotypes that discourage emotional expression in men, which often leads to mental health issues.

Universities play a key role in shaping this aspect of young adults' development by providing courses on emotional management and access to mental health resources. This approach not only aids in combating stress and anxiety among students but also promotes overall emotional resilience and better interpersonal relationships.

The conversation around men's mental health needs to transition from hushed whispers to a national dialogue. Engaging various stakeholders, from government bodies to community leaders, is imperative. Bangladesh cannot afford to remain silent on a crisis that affects a significant portion of its population. It's essential to create supportive environments and systems that cater to the mental wellbeing of all individuals, regardless of gender, to drive social cohesion and collective prosperity.