

Pre-poll violence will only scare voters off

Why is the EC not putting a stop to it?

It is disturbing that violence—that dreaded, near-certain precursor to polls in general in Bangladesh—has again become rampant ahead of the upcoming general election, despite assurances to the contrary. Even though the main opposition camp, including BNP and Jamaat, is no longer in the race and most of the candidates are somehow affiliated with the ruling camp, there have been violent clashes between supporters of those officially nominated and those of “independents”. This has happened across many districts where campaigning is going on in full swing. The use of sharp weapons and even guns has created a tense atmosphere in these areas.

If the level of aggression is already so high, what can we expect when the election day finally arrives? Moreover, why have the government, its security forces, and the Election Commission failed to prevent this unseemly, intimidating election-time environment?

On December 25, at least three Jubo League men were shot during a clash between supporters of Awami League and independent candidates in Tangail. According to a report, both camps have been involved in heated exchanges, attacks, and vandalism, including of election offices, since the campaigning began. Official response to this, however, has been grossly inadequate. Similarly, in Faridpur, supporters of an independent candidate were attacked by the associates of the AL-nominated candidate. This has been the general trend so far, with violent clashes going practically unhindered by the police while the Election Commission has been mostly unresponsive or ineffective.

In such a climate, how confident will the voters feel about casting their vote? Safety is the least that the government can ensure after depriving voters of any real choice in the election by incapacitating the main opposition. Why isn't it taking appropriate steps to prevent these disturbing incidents where innocent bystanders can easily get hurt? In one incident, a candidate even beat up a journalist because the latter had questioned him about violating the election code. This is hardly befitting a would-be lawmaker.

The EC should exercise the full extent of its authority to ensure accountability for such conducts which are more than just violations of electoral code; they easily constitute crimes in the eye of the law and should be treated as such. The police also must prevent any kind of violence during campaigning and bring the attackers to book. It is vital that they all coordinate to ensure public safety heading into the election.

We must do more to prevent pneumonia

Worrying Shishu Hospital statistics serve as a wake-up call

The fact that pneumonia, despite being a treatable and easily diagnosed disease, is still the leading cause of child mortality in Bangladesh is one of the most heartbreaking failures of our healthcare system. Every year, it kills around 24,000 children. This year's statistics have been equally chilling, with the Dhaka Shishu Hospital alone admitting 3,384 patients as of December 23. And in just the last 53 days, 92 of them died, in a trend that reportedly surpassed the hospital's previous records.

In 2020, researchers from Johns Hopkins University had found that over 100,000 children under the age of five in Bangladesh could die from pneumonia between 2020 and 2023, but that 48,000 of these deaths could be averted if Bangladesh significantly scaled up services to prevent and treat the disease. Moreover, boosting pneumonia services can create a “ripple effect” that can save an additional 92,000 children from dying of other major diseases, the study had said. We must ask then: did the government take appropriate measures? Why do most hospitals, especially in the rural areas, still not have proper medical support for pneumonia patients?

There are other concerns as well. Studies show that 40 percent of the children affected with pneumonia do not receive essential treatment. Moreover, the vaccine used under the government's EPI programme can fight the bacterial cause of the disease, but pneumonia caused by other organisms such as viruses and fungi cannot be prevented by such vaccines. Among the leading causes of pneumonia are air pollution, lack of nutrition, and lack of awareness in general—which continue to remain unaddressed. Bangladesh also lacks measures to properly study this disease in our country.

All these indicate that our health system is still not committed or equipped enough to address the threat that pneumonia and such respiratory diseases pose to children and other vulnerable groups. This is deeply frustrating. True, Bangladesh has had some success in preventing child mortality over the years, but we cannot rest on our laurels when so many are dying from pneumonia. The government must do more to address this threat.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A democracy without people

There has been so much talk about the upcoming elections. And there has been a lot to talk about no doubt. Politicians, for instance, have been bashing their political opponents, accusing them of not having the support of the people. But no one seems to be asking the people what they want. We have heard talks about the participation or non-participation of political parties, but what about the participation of the people? Why has voter turnout been declining dramatically in recent times? And why are people no longer interested in politics?

It seems our so-called democracy has turned into a democracy without the people, and our political class is to blame for that. And the way this election is being conducted proves that.

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Has Awami League delivered on its promise of quality education for all?



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The education part of Awami League's 2008 election manifesto, titled “Charter for Change (Din Bodoler Shanad),” promised the highest budget allocation for education, 100 percent net enrolment in primary schools by 2011, ending illiteracy by 2017, higher education quality, depoliticisation of educational institutions, and a new education policy, among other things. It also mentioned a significantly higher salary scale for teachers as well as teachers' pay and service commissions.

Voted to power with an overwhelming parliamentary majority that year, Sheikh Hasina's government gave the nation an education policy in 2010. It reflected a reasonable consensus about the nation's educational expectations. But in over a decade since the policy was announced, a concerted plan has not been prepared, and major efforts to implement the policy remain absent.

Notably, a permanent statutory education commission that could guide policy-based national educational development, as recommended in the 2010 policy, has not been established. An overall education law, akin to the right to education law enacted in India in 2009, has not been adopted. We did not see a real increase in the education budget either. The 100 percent target of primary education enrolment and literacy rate, though progress has been made, are yet to be achieved. Although government teachers' salaries increased, they complain of discrimination between them and other civil service cadres.

The permanent pay and service commissions for teachers have not been established, and a plan for remuneration and incentives for teachers not employed directly by the government, who are the majority, does not exist. Quality of education has not improved; it remains elusive as ever.

Inclusive and equitable quality education is the core of the sustainable development goals' (SDGs) education agenda, and Bangladesh has committed itself to working towards the goals.

Yet, since 2010—or even after 2015, when the commitment was made—a plan or strategy has not been formulated, not to speak of carrying out such a plan. A programme has not been taken up even to achieve the

target of compulsory education up to Class 8 by 2014, envisaged in the 2010 policy.

The official narrative of progress is mainly about numbers—number of schools, colleges and universities, rising enrolment, girls catching up and surpassing boys in enrolment, number of new teachers employed, total students at primary and secondary schools brought under stipend schemes, total textbooks distributed every year, number of multimedia classrooms and so on. The high pass rate in public exams is also noted, though there is scepticism about whether the rate actually measures



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

students' competence.

The list of advancements need not be underestimated, but the problem is that these are inputs into the system, which do not necessarily produce results in learning outcomes. Unless these inputs are of adequate quantity and quality, put to proper use by skilled and dedicated teachers and managers, and managed efficiently with accountability and a focus on results, they will not bear fruit. What ultimately counts is the knowledge and skills students acquire, verified by a credible method of assessing what they learn.

Equitable, inclusive quality education at primary and secondary levels cannot be achieved with the

current public investment. The budget allocation has remained at around two percent of GDP for a decade. In fact, since 2020, when the education system was disrupted by Covid-19, the budget has dipped further. In real terms, inflation and increasing enrolment have put per student expenditure on a downward trend. Now, it is approximately \$200, which is about half of the average for South Asia.

The public finance scarcities are attempted to be made up by family expenditure, which negatively impacts equity and inclusion. In 2021, Unesco's Global Education Monitoring Report estimated that 71 percent of education expenses in Bangladesh were borne by families. A recent Education Watch survey (to be released shortly) showed that, on average, a family spent Tk 13,882 during January-December, 2022 per child in primary school and Tk 27,340 at the secondary level. Major expenses were due to private tutoring and coaching, purchase of commercial guidebooks, fees for testing and

various activities charged by both primary and secondary schools, as well as transportation and lunch.

According to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2022, the average monthly household income in 2022 was Tk 32,422. These costs are clearly prohibitive for the poor and lower-middle income families. They will try to make difficult compromises and sacrifices, but still quality education for their children will remain beyond their reach.

Authorities have ignored the pleas of education researchers (such as those who prepared the recent Education Watch reports) to take recovery and redressal measures for pandemic-

changes intended are more wide-ranging and simultaneous, with even lesser preparation than for the earlier reform. Some educationists argue that the reform team has not grasped the nature and process of reform it wants to implement.

As long as education policymaking and decision-making is ad hoc and fragmented, with fleeting attention given to only parts of the system, the reform is likely to fail. When reforms are not backed by political commitment to mobilise necessary resources and some hard choices, such as depoliticising educational institutions, the quality and equity objectives will remain elusive.

ONE YEAR OF MARRAKESH TREATY ACCESSION

Progress still elusive for the visually impaired



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In September last year, Bangladesh celebrated its accession to the Marrakesh Treaty. On December 26, 2022, the agreement entered into force in Bangladesh, three months after the submission of the letter of ratification to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) headquarters: a remarkable milestone for visually impaired, blind, and print-disabled individuals.

The Marrakesh Treaty aimed to alleviate the “book famine” by facilitating access to published works, offering hope to millions who were previously excluded from the literary world. However, a year later, it is disheartening that the fervour surrounding the ratification has not translated into significant progress for the intended beneficiaries in Bangladesh.

The accession to the treaty created much optimism amongst print-disabled individuals and organisations such as Visually Impaired People's Society (VIPS), who have long demanded Bangladesh's ratification to the treaty and also amendments to the Copyright Act, 2000. However, the delay in amending the act is a significant roadblock to realising the impact of the Marrakesh Treaty, as it leaves our visually impaired

community in a legal limbo.

Bangladeshi media's lack of coverage of the crucial event last year also mirrors the persistent indifference towards disability rights in the country. Unfortunately, this apathy extends beyond headlines, with little tangible change for those eagerly anticipating the benefits promised by the treaty.

The treaty, administered by the WIPO, was designed to ease the production and international transfer of specially-adapted books for people with visual impairments. It established exceptions to traditional copyright laws, allowing access to printed works in accessible formats like Braille and digital audio files. But the “book famine” remains a pressing issue, with millions of visually impaired individuals worldwide still lacking access to printed materials in accessible formats. The Nationwide Blindness Survey 2020 found that in Bangladesh, an estimated 14.3 million people are living with mild to severe visual impairment, and 1 in every 100 adults aged 30 years or older suffers from any degree of visual impairment.

Clearly, it is crucial to move beyond symbolic gestures and focus on practical implementation without further delay. Visually impaired

children and adults have long been denied equal opportunities in Bangladesh and elsewhere. Additionally, the lack of awareness and understanding of the treaty among the general public, government officials, and even the media poses a significant obstacle to its successful implementation.

As a new parliament takes shape in January 2024, there is a chance for Bangladesh to demonstrate its commitment to inclusivity by swiftly approving the amendment to the Copyright Act. This strategic move would not only align the national legislation with international standards but also signal the country's dedication to ensuring that the visually impaired can fully reap the benefits of the Marrakesh Treaty.

The Marrakesh Treaty holds the potential to yield far-reaching benefits that extend well beyond the realm of literature accessibility. The treaty can play a pivotal role in fostering a knowledge-based economy by empowering visually impaired individuals with access to a wealth of information. When people with visual impairments can independently access literature, research materials, and educational resources, it not only enriches their personal knowledge but also enables them to actively participate in academic pursuits and contribute to various fields. This inclusion in the knowledge economy can lead to the creation of a diverse and skilled workforce, promoting innovation and driving economic growth.

Plus, by ensuring that visually impaired individuals have unhindered access to a wide range of materials—

including legal documents, government publications, and other information sources—the treaty can promote an environment where citizens, regardless of visual ability, can stay informed about and engaged in public affairs. This inclusivity promotes transparency in governance and empowers these individuals to actively participate in civic activities.

Finally, when visually impaired individuals can access the same information as their sighted counterparts, it challenges preconceived notions and fosters a more inclusive societal mindset. This increased awareness can reduce stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities, promoting a culture of inclusivity and respect for diversity.

The one-year anniversary of Bangladesh's accession serves as a critical juncture for reflection and action. The time has come to bridge the gap between promises and reality—to make literature accessible to all, regardless of visual ability. The urgency for action is underscored by the imperative need to amend the Copyright Act, 2000. The act, enacted more than two decades ago, has become outdated and fails to encompass the necessary exemptions required for the visually impaired community to fully benefit from the treaty. Despite the critical nature of this amendment, it is regrettable that the necessary legislative changes have not been implemented in a timely manner. As the visually impaired community continues to wait for justice, let us collectively strive to end the book famine and ensure that the Marrakesh Treaty's potential is fully realised in Bangladesh.