

Future lawmakers, or lawbreakers?

Heavy use of plastic in election campaigning raises concerns

As the country gears up for the 12th parliamentary election, it is disheartening to see the landscape marred by laminated and polythene-coated posters, despite a ban on their use by the Election Commission. The problem has been especially prevalent in Dhaka which has been plastered with such posters mostly by ruling party candidates, and to a lesser degree by independents and candidates from smaller parties. The plastic coating is apparently used to protect posters from being ruined by fog. But that doesn't justify breaching a ban meant to reduce the environmental cost of election campaigning.

The proliferation of such posters, however, is but part of a wider concern about environmental degradation in conventional campaigns. Besides plastic pollution, candidates have also been seen using high-volume microphones and loud music across the city, causing discomfort to the public, especially vulnerable groups like the sick, children, and the elderly. The wide distribution of promotional materials like caps and leaflets, which are invariably thrown away, or irresponsible use of disposable items like cups and plates by supporters is also posing a threat to the health of the city.

This is totally unacceptable. Candidates, many among them future lawmakers, are expected to lead by example, not encourage or be themselves engaged in breaching environmental regulations. Unfortunately, despite having the scope for alternative, modern campaigning practices using digital platforms, our politicians still seem to prefer conventional methods of public engagement. According to a study by the Environment and Social Development Organization (ESDO), the 2020 mayoral election in Dhaka saw the use of a staggering 340 million plastic-coated posters. The number could double this time, the ESDO warns. During a visit to a number of constituencies in Dhaka, our reporter saw plastic-coated posters being used indiscriminately.

Who will take responsibility for the environmental repercussions of such actions? Why is the Election Commission failing to prevent them, or punish non-compliant candidates and parties? Experts talked about the importance of including the ban on plastic use in campaigns, imposed on December 25, in the electoral code of conduct. While this may be the appropriate thing to do, the fact is, without proper enforcement, no amount of lawmaking is good enough. While we expect the EC, particularly returning officers, to play an effective role in ensuring compliance of electoral rules, it is the candidates who must recognise their responsibility in this regard and ensure environmentally friendly campaigning practices.

Save Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary

Authorities must take action against those destroying forests

The destruction of around one square kilometre of area in the Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary—to satisfy the greed of one man and his accomplices—is unacceptable. Satgar in Chattogram used to be a lush green haven for Asian elephants. However, Abu Taher, a locally influential man, and his cohorts have reportedly wiped out much of the forest area within a decade. This involved cutting down trees, razing hillocks, and lifting sand, thus making the area barren. The devastation has endangered the Asian elephants and other species.

Indiscriminate sand lifting, for example, has led to a lake forming in the area, along with at least 30 other large holes. In late 2022, an elephant calf died after falling into one of the holes, bringing to light the impact of the damage done in the process. Besides, sand lifters also destroyed at least seven hills and thousands of trees in the area. Thus, this once-natural ecosystem for endangered elephants has turned into a deathtrap for them. The destruction of their habitat has compelled the elephants to invade localities adjacent to the forest which, in turn, has increased human-elephant conflicts, even leading to the death of at least one man.

Over the last decade, the forest department has filed at least 32 cases against Abu Taher. He along with his cohorts have also been arrested at least twice, but they managed to walk free on bail. According to an official of the Chattogram South Forest Division, forest destroyers are exploiting gaps in existing laws, as the offence typically carries a very nominal punishment. Abu Taher and his men are also allegedly being protected by some ruling party leaders, making it more difficult to take action against them.

But such wanton destruction of a wildlife sanctuary must stop. Those responsible for its present state must be brought to book, and the area has to be restored. The authorities must also make necessary amendments to the environmental laws so that perpetrators cannot exploit them or loopholes in the system to ravage our nature.

New Message

To

Subject

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Explaining the potential exodus of funds from Bangladesh



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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Historically, Bangladesh's financial account averages an inflow of about 2.5 percent of GDP. But in 2022-23, it experienced an outflow of 0.5 percent of GDP, which is quite a significant reversal. This has prompted the IMF to express concern that Bangladesh might have experienced capital flight in the last financial year.

While the total shipment value of exports from the Export Promotion Bureau recorded under the balance of payment grew by 6.3 percent year-on-year in FY23, the receipts recorded by the Bangladesh Bank based on forex deposits at commercial banks increased only marginally relative to the previous year. As a result, unrealised export proceeds increased to 2.1 percent of GDP in the fiscal year. So, short-term trade credit could have sharply turned negative due to delayed repatriation and repayment of export proceeds. Interestingly, in one of its footnotes, the IMF mentions that while a number of factors could have contributed to the sudden divergence of financial account performance, high unrealised export proceeds historically point to capital flight.

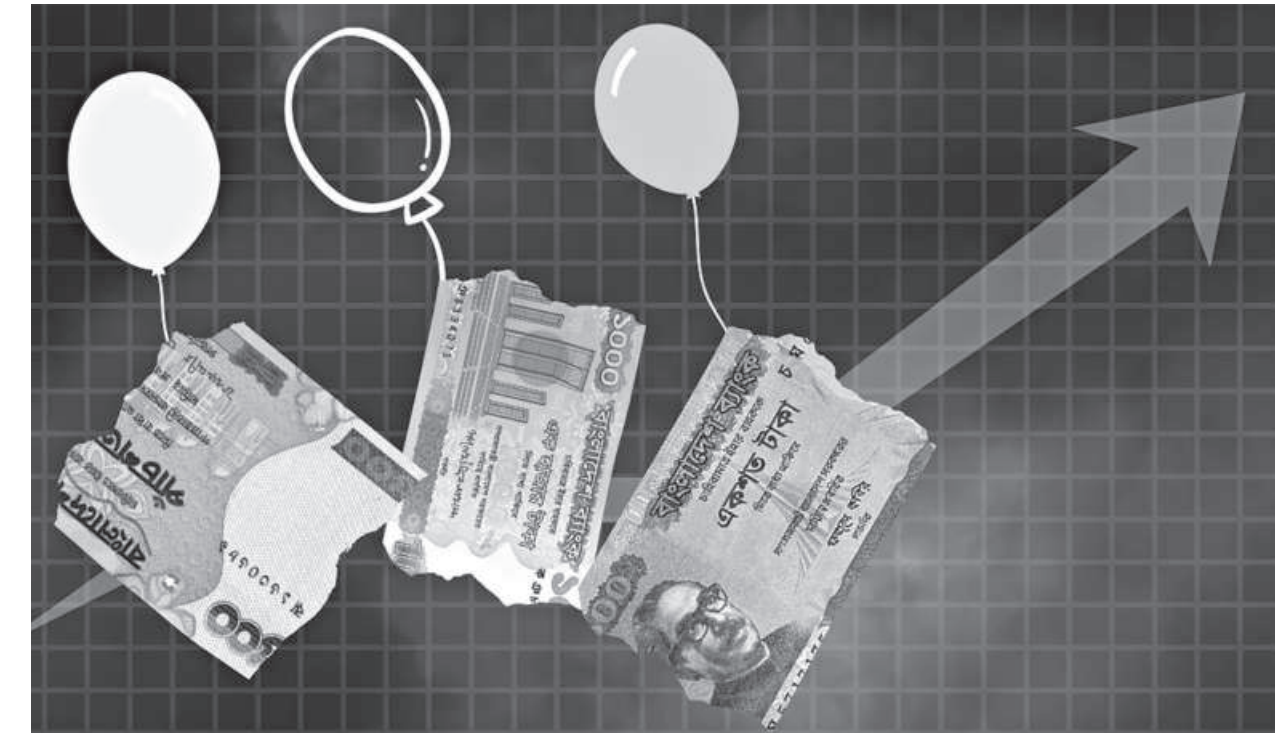
It goes without mention that capital flight is not a new phenomenon for Bangladesh. In December 2021, the Global Financial Integrity reported that the country lost approximately \$8.27 billion on average annually between 2009 and 2018 from mis-invoicing of values of import-export goods by traders, to evade taxes and illegally move money across international borders. And so, the mismatch highlighted by the IMF could indicate that capital flight in FY23 has increased even more.

Now, the obvious answer to why that may be is the upcoming elections. According to the IMF, "exporters reportedly choose to withhold bringing their proceeds back into the country until the results of the election are finalised"—and the same could be true for others too, who may also be waiting to see whether it is safe for them to bring their wealth back into the country post-election.

But there is another important factor here, which the Bangladesh Bank mentioned in its Financial Stability Report 2022. It said, "... emerging market and developing economies (EMDEs) may face the possibility of capital flight if the advanced economies increase their policy rates further in the near future"—as capital seeks higher yields

in those countries due to higher interest rates. It also warned that "a sudden reversal of cross-border capital flow could occur due to an increase in geopolitical tensions"—which Bangladesh is unwillingly, but increasingly, becoming a part of.

The economic repercussions of capital flight are manifold. Firstly, it syphons resources that could have been utilised for productive measures within the country, out of the country. It creates exchange rate pressure,



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

which leads to inflationary pressure and increased cost of imports. The impact it has on foreign exchange also creates pressure on the government to rely on external borrowing. These are all realities that Bangladesh has had to grapple with in recent years.

The issue of capital flight has been receiving renewed attention around the world, as several developing countries have been experiencing this as they make the transition to market economies. One recent study shows that capital flight from Africa—mainly driven by trade mis-invoicing—has led to much lower private investment (another problem Bangladesh has been suffering from). It has also exacerbated "declining domestic investment in productive

to acquire property abroad or in conspicuous luxury consumption. A government report titled "National Strategy for Prevention of Money Laundering and Combating Financing of Terrorism 2019-2021" had identified the top 10 countries where tainted money is syphoned from Bangladesh. A number of international organisations have also noted how Bangladeshis are increasingly buying properties in countries such as the UK, Dubai and other foreign countries.

That capital flight and embezzlement of funds from the banking sector have increased hand-in-hand since 2008 is also telling. It indicates that much of the funds that have been fraudulently taken out of

for various reasons, including lack of independence and because the perpetrators are well-connected and are being protected.

According to a former Bangladesh Bank governor, "An integrated initiative of six relevant organisations in the financial sector is needed to stop money laundering." And while coordination among them is essential, what they also need desperately is independence to investigate, pursue and prosecute individuals/groups—the majority of whom happen to be powerfully placed—for their involvement in money laundering. The nexus formed between these money launderers and those in high positions—who are protecting them—must be broken.

A New Year's message to US President Joe Biden



His Excellency Yousef SY Ramadan
is the Palestinian Ambassador to Bangladesh.

YOUSEF SY RAMADAN

Dear Mr President, as we end the year, do you look back on it and think about the Palestinian people in Gaza? When the clock hits 12, and the New Year's fireworks sparkle in the sky across the United States, will you think of the citizens of Gaza who have been looking at the sky—a home for Israeli bomb-filled warplanes—and fearing for their lives?

Do you know, Mr President, how many and who exactly were killed by Israel in Gaza? Just to remind you, 21,000 people have been murdered so far, with the death toll rising indefinitely. Among them are 8,000 children, excluding all the fetuses who died in their mothers' wombs. Young and old, male and female, writers, historians, poets, journalists, engineers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, farmers, teachers, artists, builders, ambulance and taxi drivers, and athletes who excel in all sports—uncountable talents and dreams have been murdered in Palestine in 2023.

These people, Mr President, built civilisations when the means of life were available to them. Unfortunately, you

covered-up their killing and provided the perpetrators with the latest means of lethality produced by factories in your "great nation." Perhaps you do not know that among those being killed, there are brothers of scientists who contributed to building the United States and relatives of professors who teach in your universities. They number in the thousands and are cousins of Palestinians who gave you their votes, the same votes that helped you reach the White House. These are the people who are categorically killed by your warplanes and missiles.

Mr President, you have been tepidly calling for the establishment of a state for the Palestinians, but what is actually happening is the killing of the citizens of this state before its birth. If the situation continues as it is, then this state that you speak of, will be a prison for orphans, widows, the disabled, and children, whose memories will forever be tarnished with the terrifying sounds of explosions, the roaring of warplanes, the scenes of the mass burials of their loved ones, and the screams of those stuck under the rubble.

Mr President, why can't you and the United States—the so-called guardian of democracy and human rights—extend the same values and compassion to the persecuted Palestinian people? You were quick to express outrage and immense sadness when you accepted the Israeli propaganda about beheaded babies without any evidence, only to be proven wrong later on. Now, you have seen clear proof of your planes and missiles turning the bodies of thousands of Palestinian children into pieces. Where is that outrage now?

You continue to veto ceasefires saying Israel has a "right to defend itself." Against what? We all know that phrase is a deadly rhetoric—deadly, because it has led to mass murder. On that note, Mr President, we refuse to believe you "support" Israel, where the citizens are protesting to end the war too. Instead, you encourage Israel to proceed with the dual killing of Palestinians and Israelis. You use your "veto" in the United Nations Security Council to prevent any glimmer of justice toward the Palestinians, to shamelessly play political games at the cost of lives.

These vetoes, Mr President, are responsible for the continuation of endless death and destruction. It is responsible for Israel sinking itself in the burning sea and sands of Gaza.

With US funding, Israel continues to perpetuate a "war" with genocidal objectives. It is most disappointing,

that after defeating your predecessor Donald Trump, calling him an "existential threat" to democracy, you have stood behind a fascist leader in Israel. Not only is Netanyahu morally wrong, but his objectives are unrealistic in nature too. Netanyahu has no chance of achieving his sadistic quest to demolish the people of Palestine. It is delusional to believe that, after 76 years of resistance, Palestine and its people can be erased.

This letter, Mr President, is a message on behalf of 15 million people who, despite being subjected to the worst kind of horrors taking place in recent history, still fight for freedom, peace and justice. Our Palestinian sage and poet Mahmoud Darwish wisely said: "How large the revolution, how narrow the journey, how grand the idea, how small the state!" Regarding the Palestinian people, he said: "We love life whenever we can; wherever we settle we harvest a murdered man. Palestine will never be erased."

So, Mr President, as we are on the cusp of a new Gregorian year, we wish to bid farewell to the year 2023 with all its tragedies and woes and begin a new year that will bring hope and freedom for the people who have suffered and suffered and suffered. When the fireworks sparkle at the dawn of this new year, we hope you ask yourself: How long will the US remain a ruthless enemy of humanity and how long will you continue to deny us the right to freedom?