

An election that will not strengthen democracy

What real options do voters have to choose from?

We condemn wholeheartedly the setting on fire of several compartments of the Benapole Express train in the run up to the election. As expected, blame for it has already been attributed, although we believe it deserves a thorough and independent investigation. Additionally, within the span of 16 hours until 10am on Saturday, 14 arson incidents were reported, which is extremely disturbing. These attacks likely being connected to the election, it is absolutely essential that we ask: what sort of an election are we having today?

Before answering that question, one must also ask: what are the basic requirements of an election? In any election, voters must get to choose from diverse policies being proposed by different parties. There must be discussions on the merits and demerits of the policies being presented. And the successes and failures of the ruling party and the opposition must be up for debate. The so-called election that we are having today lacks all of that. The ruling Awami League has shown no desire to give anyone a chance to discuss the effectiveness of its policies. In fact, anyone who has dared to criticise its actions and policies over the last five years—and indeed its last three terms—has been coloured as a supporter of the opposition. And by clamping down on dissent, it has completely obliterated all possibility of legitimate debate.

In a substantial number of constituencies, there is only one real candidate. The others are inconsequential. Which means that a vast number of the seats are already guaranteed for the ruling party. Many seats are being contested between AL-nominated candidates and AL candidates running as independent, which means there are no real options for the voters to choose from. By placing dummy candidates as contestants, the ruling party is only disenfranchising voters even more. The prime minister has very cleverly allowed this to happen to give the impression that there is a contest. But ultimately, this election does not meet any of the criteria required for a genuine one.

On the flipside, the BNP had been campaigning and appealing to voters to not vote, which we did not protest. However, to call a hartal on election day is simply unacceptable. Ruling party men, meanwhile, have been harassing, threatening and intimidating voters to cast their ballot to give the impression that this is a legitimate election. We strongly condemn both these actions. What we are witnessing is essentially an engineered intra-party contest. As such, it raises more questions than answers, and will only end up fracturing the political landscape and pushing us deeper into a quagmire in which the role of voters keeps eroding further and further.

Save Bhairab River before it's too late

How long will we remain silent while our rivers are being ravaged?

It is frustrating to see how most of our rivers are struggling to survive due to the mindless activities of land grabbers, sand lifters and polluters. Equally frustrating is how sometimes state officials responsible for rivers are themselves complicit in such activities, in the name of development. One such river is Bhairab, which flows through Khulna and Jashore in the southwestern part of Bangladesh. According to a report by this daily, the river is on its deathbed due to encroachment, pollution, unplanned river dredging, and bridge construction works. Consequently, it has shrunk so much over the years that, in many places, it looks rather like a canal. The resultant loss of navigability has also contributed to a livelihood crisis for thousands of people in the region.

Reportedly, there are hundreds of business establishments including factories, depots and industrial units—both legal and illegal—on both sides of the river. Waste generated from these establishments as well as nearby households is regularly discharged into the river. Moreover, over 300 cargo vessels carrying goods and oil from Jashore's Noapara to different parts of the country every day pollute it by discharging chemicals. At least 20 large drains under the Khulna City Corporation also directly discharge liquid waste into the river. The construction of hundreds of illegal structures on riverbanks have also shrunk it significantly. We must ask: is there no one to stop this massive onslaught?

While we often blame the polluters and grabbers for the tragic fate of our rivers, we seem to ignore the fact that unplanned development activities, such as constructing random bridges and culverts, are also causing them to shrink. Across Noapara, a total of 51 bridges and culverts constructed on the Bhairab River were reportedly not planned properly. If this is the condition of one river in one area, imagine how bad the situation is across the country.

It's saddening how—despite so many government pledges, court directives, billions spent in river projects, and the awarding of a "living entities" status to rivers—very little has been achieved in terms of protecting our rivers. Bhairab is just one victim of the authorities' failure. We urge the BIWTA and other relevant authorities to stop the polluters and grabbers, and undertake proper measures to increase its navigability. We must save this river and others facing a similar fate for our own sake.

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The quest is for an opposition, not a government



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THE STREET VIEW

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With the main political opposition, BNP, boycotting the polls, January 7 is a settled affair—with the ruling Awami League and other contesting parties dividing up the seats between themselves. Currently, even the main opposition in parliament, Jatiya Party, has its stalwarts contesting the election as AL-endorsed candidates, as if to reassure everyone that they are not being so audacious as to challenge the ruling party. And considering that there is no other party (with a voter base of any significance) that is maverick enough to actually challenge ruling party candidates, the election outcome is all but a foregone conclusion. So the excitement and thrill that should have been centring the polls are absent. That Awami League will form the next government is common knowledge. However, who will form the opposition is still a matter of speculation. Thus, one might even say that this election is a quest to find an opposition, and not a decider of the government.

Most of the independent candidates, especially the potential winners, are ruling party leaders who did not secure the nomination they were expecting. It is clear that, just as the election has turned into a stage-managed event, the opposition will also be a "sponsored" one.

That the ruling party is unmatched in willingness and cunning in regards to electoral politics goes without saying. What will, however, remain a challenge is voter turnout. At the recent by-elections in Dhaka-17 and Chattogram-10, the turnout was barely over 11 percent, whereas the ruling Awami League's historic vote bank consists of at least 35 percent of the entire voting population. This indicates that not even Awami League's own base shows up to vote for their candidates when the elections are stage-managed. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why ruling party candidates have taken various steps to boost voter presence at the polling booths. This included, in Thakurgaon-1 constituency, the AL candidate threatening the suspension of social safety net benefits for BNP supporters who do not go to vote. One must wonder whether this candidate even recognises that this is an intimidation tactic that could have him disqualified. In his defence, one might say that AL has been at the helm



PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

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for so long that its members fail to see the distinction between a tax-funded state programme and a party initiative.

The other challenge, of course, is to make the election look competitive, if not participatory, which is another way to compensate for BNP's boycott and demonstrate that voters are not being deprived of viable options. But this is hardly the case. Of the 44 registered political parties, 27 are contesting the polls. In other words, 63 percent parties are contesting, which is not too bad even though the main opposition camp is not taking part. However, besides three parties—Awami League, Jatiya Party, and Workers Party of Bangladesh—none of the 27 have secured more than one percent of the popular vote in the last 15 years. And, of these parties, 21 accounted for just three percent of popular votes altogether, while four parties are taking part in the election for the first time. Perhaps the most damning statistic is that Awami League saw its share of popular votes rise from 48 percent in 2008 to 74 percent in 2018, which points to the obvious: that voters with other preferences are refraining from voting because they are not being presented with viable alternatives.

The essence of an election lies

but was unable to move public opinion or conduct a strong enough street campaign to topple the government (as Awami League had done in 1996). In the 2018 election, in which BNP did take part, the election result was so overwhelmingly in favour of Awami League (thanks to its blatant engineering) that even the AL party hawks were embarrassed at their supposed election landslide. This time, BNP was adamant that elections be held under a caretaker government, which Awami League did not agree to, citing constitutional provisions. Now, BNP is actively trying to dissuade people from voting, having declared a general strike on election day. BNP leaders in Khulna have been especially innovative. As the last two elections saw a large number of "phantom" votes, leaders of BNP's Khulna unit went to a local graveyard and called upon the dead to "not rise from their graves and cast votes" on January 7.

At the same time, election commissioners are making different comments about the fairness of the election. The election chief recently said, "It is not enough for polls to be fair." He said that "they must be credible" as well, to demonstrate their fairness. "We cannot allow incorrect

would fail.

It appears that the election officials have suddenly become invested in the quality of election beyond its optics, which is a certain shift from their course thus far. Such a shift can hardly amount to anything more than lip service this late in the game, but the comments do smack of an attempt to woo the same international community that the current regime has deliberately antagonised so far.

Bangladesh's 12th parliamentary election is likely going to be the first of about 50 national elections globally, as many countries are scheduled to go to the ballots this year, with over two billion voters. Of these 50 countries, some have matured democracies wherein transition of power is peaceful and transparent, while some have more fragile democratic dispensations. Then there are others with autocratic regimes, where the difference between the party and the state has all but disappeared and elections are a mere cosmetic exercise. It is difficult to say which category Bangladesh falls under in terms of its democratic standing. But what can be said with certainty is that no country aspiring for genuine democratic practices will seek to emulate the January 7 election.

What's the civil society's stake in strengthening democracy?



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"Democracy, good governance, and modernity cannot be imported or imposed from outside a country"—the words of former Lebanese President Emile Lahoud resonate deeply in present-day Bangladesh. The country has witnessed significant Western interest recently in issues related to Bangladesh's democracy, human rights, elections, and the rule of law. Interestingly, the Eastern blocs also engage in these discussions, offering contrasting perspectives. What's notable, however, is the relatively muted engagement of the nation's own civil society representatives in these debates. While they express their perspectives to foreign delegations, their local participation remains reserved, prompting questions about the underlying reasons for this apparent public aloofness.

The recent scrutiny of the widely discussed US visa policy for Bangladesh highlights the shared responsibility for free and fair elections, a crucial element for democratic governance, stressing the need for active participation from voters, political parties, the government, security forces, civil society, and the media. This underscores the need for impartial and open-minded civil society leaders within Bangladesh to play a more active role in addressing the

nation's political challenges effectively. Now, the pressing question arises: where is Bangladesh's once-vibrant civil society, historically pivotal in crucial moments? Should the mantle of nurturing democracy rest solely on political parties?

Globally, the shrinking of civic spaces is a concerning trend, and Bangladesh is no exception. In the recent report by CIVICUS, a global civil society alliance, Bangladesh's civic space has been downgraded to the "closed" category, marking it with the worst rating possible. After lingering in the "repressed" category for several years, the country was placed on the "watchlist" last year and has now further declined, joining the ranks of nations with severely restricted statuses in Asia, alongside Afghanistan, China, Hong Kong, Laos, Myanmar, North Korea, and Vietnam. The report, titled "People Power Under Attack 2023," cites an escalating crackdown on the opposition, activists, journalists, and dissenting voices in Bangladesh ahead of the national election on January 7 as the reason for this downgrade.

The ongoing trend of diminishing civic space and democracy backsliding in Bangladesh is a long-standing issue. A recent study by The Asia Foundation, involving prominent civil

society organisations (CSOs) from Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, echoes the observations of CIVICUS and other civil rights groups. While these nations experience a significant reduction in civic spaces, particularly for CSOs focusing on human rights, anti-corruption initiatives, transparency and accountability, Bangladesh stands at the forefront in suppressing civic freedoms among its neighbouring countries. The study paints a troubling picture, revealing that about two-thirds of Bangladeshi respondents face heightened obstacles in upholding individual rights and freedoms. Intriguingly, CSOs in Bangladesh face relatively fewer impediments when engaged in activities related to healthcare, education, women's empowerment, and public service delivery.

Analysing the reasons for shrinking civic spaces in Bangladesh and the increasing fragility of civil society institutions reveals that CSOs have encountered challenges in maintaining their anticipated roles of neutrality and impartiality. Instead, a portion of them has become entangled in political ideologies and partisan interests. On the other hand, major political parties have sometimes viewed civil society as opposition, yet these organisations remain an essential part of society, safeguarding human rights and nurturing democracy.

In contemporary society, the relationship between the government and its citizens has evolved into more of a "give and take" dynamic. In such scenarios, civil society institutions serve as a vital bridge connecting these two spheres: the government and the populace. Within a democratic system, it is imperative to acknowledge that

the government does not assume ownership of the state; instead, it functions as a temporary custodian designated by the people for a specific tenure. Their primary responsibility is to act in the best interests of the nation and operate the state apparatus with transparency. In such a dynamic, CSOs, along with the media, play a crucial role as effective and comparable social watchdogs, responsible for monitoring the regular activities of the government. Their mission aligns with the core principles of democratic governance, wherein government representatives are entrusted with the responsibility of serving the people's interests and ensuring the public's welfare.

The flourishing of a democratic state hinges on the embodiment of values like tolerance, generosity and respect, especially towards minority groups. Civil society institutions are integral to this societal transformation, playing a crucial role in building a strong democratic foundation. As the world observes Bangladesh grapple with challenges related to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, the nation's civil society leaders must step forward to address the prevailing political impasse. Additionally, civil society institutions in Bangladesh must reclaim their impartial and principled position, free from any political biases. US President Joe Biden once emphasised, "No fundamental social change occurs merely because government acts. It's because civil society, the conscience of a country, begins to rise up and demand—demand—demand change."

This is the opportune moment for our civil society leaders to rise to the occasion.