

Surely we deserve safe public transport

Get rid of rundown vehicles, introduce new ones

It is quite telling that, in 2024, a non-government organisation has to demand that the government scrap unfit, rundown buses in the capital city. The Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity has also proposed introducing 5,000 good quality buses under the government's management to resolve Dhaka's traffic chaos. We cannot help but be frustrated that such a basic requirement—having a decent public transport system and getting rid of dilapidated buses—needs to be demanded. That, too, when thousands of crores of taka have been spent on Dhaka's metro rail, expressway and flyovers, all of which have been welcome developments but have not solved the daily traffic congestion on the ground. When it is evident that ordinary citizens continue to rely on the public transport system, why must they have to board rickety, unfit buses?

We welcome the organisation's suggestion to bring the new buses under government management as we have seen how syndicates of private bus companies hold the public transport system hostage by holding strikes whenever there is an attempt to bring discipline to the system. What's more, the government has indulged these syndicates. For instance, why would it go back on its decision to put a cap on the economic life of buses at 20 years and trucks at 25 years?

Thus, despite prior promises to take them off the streets, we now see decrepit buses with their paint peeling off, sometimes missing a headlight and with shoddy seats, plying through the streets. Not only do they contribute to air pollution with their noxious, black smoke, they are also dangerous and can cause fatal accidents. We agree with the suggestion to have a new bus company under the government's management or through public-private partnership (PPP). According to the samity, the Tk 3 lakh crore invested in metro rail and elevated expressway will cater to only 35 percent commuters, while the introduction of 5,000 new buses at a cost of around Tk 3,000 crore will be able to transport 65 percent passengers. From an economical and public interest perspective, it seems prudent to have fit, comfortable buses on the roads that are controlled and managed by the government in full or in collaboration with the private sector.

Commuters in Dhaka want a modern, safe and affordable public transport system that will significantly reduce the constant traffic gridlocks, which cause enormous loss of productive hours, not to mention take a heavy toll on public health. Introducing an accountable public transport system must be prioritised by this government. In addition, enforcing traffic laws, which include punishing rash driving, illegal parking and eliminating corruption, must go hand in hand to bring discipline and efficiency in the public transport system.

How long must workers wait for their dues?

The indefinite delay in labour courts ends up enabling errant owners

It is a fact universally acknowledged that justice delayed is justice denied, but that, unfortunately, seems to be the unacknowledged reality of the labour courts in this country. Bangladesh's labour law stipulates that the verdict of the labour court must be given within 60 days from the date of filing the case, with a caveat to extend the time by 90 days if appropriate reasons are recorded. However, according to a recent report in *Prothom Alo*, a total of 21,617 cases are pending at the courts, with some cases pending for as long as 10 years, as of November 30, 2023. Around 90 percent of the cases were filed by RMG workers in relation to complaints surrounding illegal dismissals, non-payment or delayed payment of wages and benefits, workplace injuries, and violations of trade union rights. For workers who earn next to nothing, and who have no other recourse for justice except the labour courts, such delays—to say nothing of the associated costs incurred during this period—are tantamount to emotional, physical and economic harassment.

Lawyers, labour leaders and victims say that there are various reasons for such delays: fewer courts than needed to discharge the cases on time, various tactics used by lawyers of the owners to delay the cases indefinitely, and lack of effective steps to settle the cases. Another depressing reality is the corruption of some labour leaders, particularly those affiliated with the ruling party, who ultimately do not attend the hearings to represent the workers' interests. With the system rigged against them, many workers end up dropping out of the running, convinced that they will not get justice in the end. For others, the process of seeking justice is too expensive for it to be worthwhile to keep on spending money with the hope that someday—if ever—they will receive their dues.

This state of affairs is simply unacceptable. The legal system should aid those most vulnerable and wronged—in this case, the workers—not enable the owners to get away with exploitation. We need more and better equipped labour courts to dispose the cases more judiciously, to be sure, but we also need them to abide by the time stipulations as stated in the labour law. The labour law should be amended to ensure compliance with certain requirements. Those with money and power cannot be allowed to buy their way out of grave injustices.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Price control during Ramadan

With Ramadan just two months away, the prices of daily essentials is going to rise to sky-high levels. We've been seeing this trend for decades now. As food inflation is already high, further price hikes, largely caused by unscrupulous practices of traders, will put the average citizen in an even tighter bind. While the government has taken certain steps, those don't seem to be bearing fruit. We, therefore, urge the authorities to take effective measures to prepare for this potential crisis.

Maimuna Reza
Dhaka

PEOPLE'S LOSS OF FAITH IN ELECTIONS

To what extent is the EC to blame?



Kamal Ahmed
is an independent journalist.
His X handle is @ahmedk

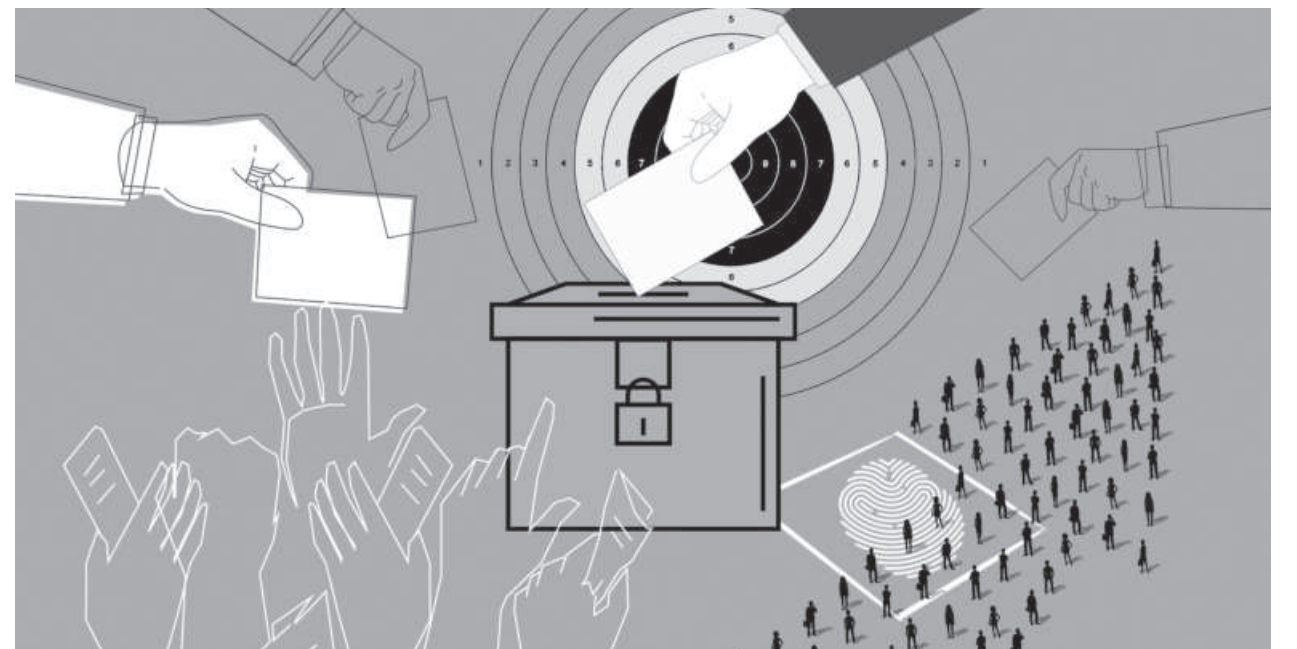
KAMAL AHMED

Since the Awami League's fourth consecutive victory in what appeared to be an essentially one-sided election, much of the discussion has centred on the future trajectory of politics and the potential impact on business and the economy. A crucial institution—the Election Commission (EC)—should not skip a closer scrutiny of its role in staging the election, which allowed the ruling party to manipulate the system adeptly and walk away unchallenged. During an event on January 18, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibur Awal, without taking any responsibility, finally acknowledged that people's confidence in the electoral system has declined.

The CEC's realisations that the election was not sufficiently participatory and that "the crisis still remains as the polls (have) not been acceptable to some parties" make us wonder how he could still claim that "the nation could overcome a crisis through this election"? His remarks at the thanks giving event at the commission indicate that they are struggling to reconcile with the facts that the election they conducted fell far short of the threshold of a democratic exercise. Putting together his admission of "not participatory enough" with his previous assertion that if one percent vote was cast, the polls would get legality but not legitimacy, one can easily deduce that this election's legitimacy is in question.

The EC's attempts to portray the election as participatory and fair seem to have been more focused on appearance than on genuine efforts to achieve these goals. For instance, sending an invitation letter to the deserted and locked BNP office—instead of ensuring an enabling environment—appeared to be a mere public relations stunt. The cancellation of one sitting MP's candidature for violating electoral code served as a diversion from the EC's inaction in numerous other violations.

The Transparency International Bangladesh's (TIB) 12th National Parliament Election Process Tracking report, published last week, sheds light on the EC's failures. One of the most crucial observations by TIB is, "The Election Commission, sometimes by compulsion in the name of



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Constitutional and legal compulsion and on occasions by design, played the role of a key catalyst for the realization of the agenda of the one-sided election. Other state institutions, especially law enforcement agencies and administration were also used to play, or played the same role in similar ways." The report outlines the EC's failures throughout the pre-election phase, the campaign phase, and the actual election period. The pre-election phase included voter registration, redrawing of constituencies, registration of new political parties, making changes in the Representation of the People Order (RPO), holding dialogue as part of its confidence-building exercise, registrations of local and foreign observers, role of political parties, schedule announcement, and submission of nominations and scrutinisation of their validity. Unfortunately, each of those acts stoked new controversies and raised questions about the EC's mandated neutrality and independence. Its handling of observers—international observers, in particular—is a pretty shocking example of its complicity with the government.

rules and code of conduct. The findings, which align with reports from national and international media, challenge the credibility of the election.

It's not only the mainstream media. Social media platforms, too, are awash with videos exposing irregularities, including ballot stuffing, children casting votes, creation of fake queues in the presence of foreign media and observers, and polling agents being forced out. This evidence further underscores the need for a thorough examination of the EC's role. Had the EC installed CCTV cameras at the polling stations instead of spending so much energy on its electronic voting machine (EVM) project, which was eventually abandoned due to a lack of funding, it could have managed the polls a little better. As statements made by losing nominees of the ruling Awami League and its allies, including some top politicians, also supplemented TIB's findings, one might wonder whether Obaidul Quader would call them BNP spokespersons as well.

In the absence of real competition and given the opposition's boycott, both the ruling party and the EC focused

their attention on ensuring at least 50 percent voter turnout. The sudden and mysterious rise of turnout figures in the last hour of election day, which otherwise seems improbable, raised strong suspicion that it was yet another act by the EC to assist the ruling party to make the election appear reasonably participatory.

With election expert groups from the European Union and the IRI-NDI

How garment manufacturers can cut costs



RMG NOTES

Mostafiz Uddin
is the managing director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE).

MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

In an ever-evolving and competitive global market, garment manufacturers should constantly challenge themselves to find innovative ways to reduce costs without compromising on quality and efficiency. Rising production expenses, fluctuating raw material prices, and increased competition make cost reduction imperative for sustainable business growth. There are several actionable strategies manufacturers can adopt to streamline operations and reduce their cost base.

In recent years, sustainability has become more than just a buzzword; it's a business imperative. Garment manufacturers can significantly reduce costs by adopting sustainable practices throughout their supply chain. Sustainable initiatives not only contribute to environmental well-being, but also result in long-term cost savings. Some key actions include switching to sustainable and cost-effective materials, such as organic cotton, recycled polyester and other eco-friendly alternatives, to reduce raw material costs and appeal to environmentally conscious consumers.

Implementing energy-efficient technologies and practices can also lead to substantial cost-cutting. Investing in modern machinery with lower energy consumption and optimising production schedules to minimise energy usage during off-peak hours are effective strategies. Likewise, minimising waste in the production process not only aligns with sustainable principles, but also cuts down on material costs. Manufacturers can implement lean manufacturing techniques, recycle waste materials,

and optimise cutting patterns to reduce fabric wastage. Key principles of lean manufacturing include continuous improvement whereby employees are empowered to identify and suggest solutions to streamline processes. This includes the regular review and updating of manufacturing practices to enhance efficiency.

Lean manufacturing also involves adopting just-in-time inventory practices to minimise storage costs and reduce the risk of overproduction. This strategy helps maintain a lean and agile supply chain, ensuring that materials are used efficiently without excess stock.

Production flow optimisation, meanwhile, sees the analysis and optimisation of the flow of production by eliminating bottlenecks and implementing efficient layouts. This can enhance the overall productivity of the manufacturing process, reducing lead times and costs.

Cross-training employees on multiple tasks enables flexibility in workforce allocation. This approach maximises efficiency without the need for excessive staffing levels.

Another way to cut costs is through embracing technology and automation. The adoption of technology and automation is a game-changer for garment manufacturers looking to reduce costs and enhance efficiency. While the initial investment might be significant, the long-term benefits are substantial.

Some ways to leverage technology include use of advanced manufacturing technologies. Many leading players are now investing in state-of-the-art machinery and equipment that can

significantly improve productivity and reduce labour costs. Automated cutting machines, robotics, and computerised sewing machines can enhance precision and efficiency.

Or how about utilising data analytics tools to analyse market trends and forecast demand accurately? This ensures that production aligns with actual market needs, preventing overproduction and unnecessary costs.

Meanwhile, enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems can streamline various business processes, from inventory management to order processing. This integration enhances communication and coordination across departments, reducing errors and delays. Manufacturers can also embrace digital prototyping tools to reduce the time and costs associated with traditional sample development. This not only accelerates the design process, but also cuts material wastage.

Collaborative relationships with suppliers can also yield significant cost savings for garment manufacturers. Building strong partnerships with reliable suppliers helps in negotiating favourable terms, optimising logistics, and ensuring a steady supply of high-quality materials. Key strategies include establishing long-term relationships with suppliers and negotiating mutually beneficial contracts. Long-term commitments can lead to better pricing and more favourable terms, providing stability for both parties. Progressive manufacturers also look to work closely with suppliers to identify opportunities for joint cost reduction. This may involve collaborating on product innovation, process improvements or logistics optimisation.

Manufacturers should look to optimise the supply chain by improving logistics and transportation efficiency. Consolidate shipments, negotiate favourable freight rates, and explore alternative transportation modes to reduce costs. Also seek to develop risk mitigation strategies in collaboration with suppliers to address potential

disruptions in the supply chain. This includes diversifying suppliers and maintaining contingency plans for unforeseen events.

While cost reduction is essential, it should not come at the expense of product quality. In fact, ensuring high-quality products can lead to long-term cost savings by reducing returns, rework, and warranty claims. Implementing robust quality control measures can have a positive impact on both customer satisfaction and the bottom line. Manufacturers should also invest in continuous training programmes to ensure employees are well-equipped to maintain high-quality standards. Well-trained staff are more likely to produce error-free products, reducing the need for rework and improving overall efficiency.

Factory owners should also establish feedback loops with customers to gather insights on product quality and identify areas for improvement. This proactive approach allows manufacturers to address issues promptly and enhance product quality over time.

Finally, owners should adopt robust quality management systems (QMS) to standardise processes, monitor performance, and continuously improve quality. Certification under international quality standards can enhance credibility and market competitiveness.

In the competitive landscape of garment manufacturing, cost reduction is crucial for sustainable growth and to underpin better wages for garment workers, which is something we all want. By embracing sustainable practices, implementing lean manufacturing principles, leveraging technology, collaborating with suppliers, and prioritising quality control, garment manufacturers can strategically reduce their cost base while maintaining or even improving product quality. These actions contribute to the financial health of the business and also position manufacturers to thrive in a dynamic and challenging global market.