

When should student union polls be held?

That should be determined by the needs of university students

We see no valid reason for the divisions among student bodies regarding the timing of student union polls at public universities. Reportedly, the Students Against Discrimination (SAD) platform and Chhatra Shibir favour holding elections without delay, as they are confident of winning. However, Chhatra Dal prefers postponing the elections until after the national polls, as its leaders are reportedly not yet “fully active” on campuses. Meanwhile, most left-leaning student parties also support delaying the elections, citing the need to reform the structure of student unions.

Although most student bodies united during the July uprising that brought down Sheikh Hasina’s autocratic regime, divisions began to emerge after Dhaka University authorities formed a special committee on November 14 to conduct the Ducus elections. These divisions are concerning as they appear to prioritise political interests over the needs of students.

Student union polls, not just at DU, must be held based on the needs of university students—not external factors like national elections. Chhatra Dal’s push for postponement until after national polls seems to hark back to the old system where ruling parties granted undue advantages to their student wings. This system cultivated political dominance on campuses, disregarding the welfare of the broader student community.

It is crucial to remember that such politics of dominance caused immense suffering for students, degraded the quality of education, and undermined universities and colleges over the 15 years of Awami rule. During this period, Chhatra League’s reign of terror reached unprecedented levels, with the tragic death of Abrar Fahad at BUET becoming a rallying point for the July uprising against the fascist regime and its oppressive student wing. Although not on the same scale, previous governments also misused student wings to achieve political ends. In post-uprising Bangladesh, the people reject any return to these practices—a message that political and student parities must take to heart.

At the same time, it is important to ensure that all student bodies are given a level playing field for fair elections at different universities. Therefore, the elections should not be rushed either.

Public universities have mechanisms to form their own election commissions, and they should follow timelines that best serve their students. In addition, necessary reforms should be considered to ensure these elections properly reflect student interests. Prospective candidates and student bodies must recognise that the only purpose of these elections is to serve the general student population. Both students and the public expect a new kind of student politics—one that fosters learning and leadership, not domination, criminality, or terrorisation.

End the brick kiln menace

984 kilns operating in breach of regulations in Rangpur

The number is staggering, and it’s frustrating that such numbers exist despite there being a pro-environment government in place. According to a report citing the departments of environment and agricultural extension in Rangpur, the division has 984 brick kilns—set up on farmlands across its eight districts—operating in violation of government regulations. These kilns use fertile topsoil to make bricks in a process that causes significant damage to the local environment, livelihoods, and health. While the proliferation of such kilns, owned or operated mostly by people with political connections, was understandable under the Awami League regime, their continued operation now questions the ability and sincerity of the interim administration.

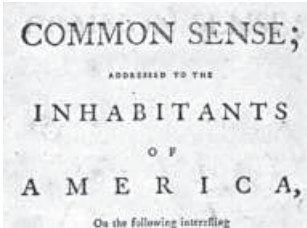
The situation is by no means unique to Rangpur. Similar operations also continue in many other areas, ravaging topsoil and burning bricks with impunity. Not long ago, we highlighted the case of Brahmanbaria where, according to a *Prothom Alo* report, 56 kilns operate illegally. Many of them, including one set up by a former Awami League lawmaker, have no valid documents such as environmental clearance or the permit for brick burning. Many were set up on agricultural lands and even wetland areas. In Lalmonirhat, according to another recent report, 36 brick kilns are operating without a clearance certificate. Although there is no central database on the number of illegal or non-compliant brick kilns in the country, the above reports portray a grim picture.

The question is, what is the interim government doing? To be fair, the environment ministry did take some encouraging steps, including the development of a National Air Quality Management Action Plan in early November to tackle sources of air pollution and enhance enforcement mechanisms. More recently, it has overseen a number of drives through mobile courts targeting illegal kilns, shutting down quite a few by demolishing their chimneys while ordering the closure of multiple others. These measures, however, are proving to be inadequate to address the menace of brick kilns.

We, therefore, urge the government to step up its efforts. Given the massive impact of brick kilns, having legal papers or not, it is no longer enough to just go after a few illegal ones without enforcing compliance across the sector or addressing the heavy reliance on topsoil or traditional bricks. What’s at stake here is not just the health of our environment or local communities. The livelihoods of farmers, and by extension the nation’s food security, are also at risk. So, the government must explore options to replace traditional brick-making in a way that eventually reduces topsoil and fuel consumption.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

‘Common Sense’ published



On this day in 1776, Thomas Paine published *Common Sense*, a 50-page pamphlet that sold more than 500,000 copies within a few months and called for a war of independence that would later become the American Revolution.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Bangladesh’s eunomia problem

THE GRUDGING URBANIST

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Let us ask an elusive question against the current political situation in Bangladesh: what creates a good nation? An ambitious constitution? Honest and accountable leaders? Effective policies? People themselves? We begin by discussing the idea of the constitution. You may not have noticed that you don’t have to sign the constitution to pledge your allegiance to it or abide by it. The state assumes that you as a citizen are going to accept the constitution as a social contract and respect and follow it. In this assumption, the state imagines a nation with common beliefs and aspirations, and a shared interest in history, language, and culture. The constitution places a lot of trust in people to see, understand, and approve how it seeks to create a good nation with a common purpose. By championing a national mission, the constitution supposes that it can provide some consistency to people’s public lives.

Yet, the idea of the constitution is tricky. It is a deeply idealistic instrument of the state in the sense that it is broadly based on people’s collective trust and willingness to accept it as the nation’s guiding principles. When that trust is not there, the constitution is fragile, becoming merely a book that catches dust on the shelf of a dimly lit office. Furthermore, as legal scholars have argued, the constitution presents a larger moral quandary. Even if it is ratified by the national assembly, it may not be just. It may only reflect the aims and machinations of an exclusive power-wielding group. When the US constitution was ratified in 1788, enslaved people in the country were considered three-fifths of a person and women didn’t have the right to vote. The point is that a ratified constitution may not guarantee a fair society. To add to the complexity, there are nations—such as the UK, Canada, Saudi Arabia, and Israel—that do not have a single or full written constitution, rather various laws, conventions, principles, and judicial decisions.

Despite the inherent limitations in the ways the constitution is conceived, the image, purpose, and identity of a nation that it seeks to articulate are essential for the nation to function as a unit. But the problem is this: for people to collectively believe in the constitution as a social contract, there must be broad agreement on some “fundamentals” that take shape organically from within society over a period. In an ideal world, the constitution has already embodied these fundamentals to flesh out the details. Only when the public accepts the fundamentals wholeheartedly does the constitution begin to make sense.

But what may the fundamentals be? They may include: i) that all people—irrespective of their race, gender, ethnicity, and religion—are equal before the law; ii) peaceful coexistence even while in disagreement; iii) free and fair election as the basis of democratic governance; iv) a tyranny-proof system of checks and balances in power; v) respect for the natural environment; vi) independent institutions; and vii) some historical happenings that galvanised the nation in the first place.

In the absence of public trust in the fundamentals, the constitution does not and cannot make good sense. On January 6, 2021, the US constitution became dangerously brittle until then Vice President Mike Pence certified

Athenian legislator Solon came up with the idea of *eunomia*, an ideal political order that served the interests of all feuding parties. In addition to creating the social framework for a sound distributive justice, *eunomia* outlined, most importantly, how things *should be* in an ideal society. In other words, Solon created some fundamentals that brought people together, enabling them not only to transcend their narrow selfish interests, but also to believe in the virtues of citizenship and democracy.

the 2020 US presidential election results. The constitution is not—has never been—enough to create a good nation. Let me make two crucial points here. First, what is most important in creating a good nation is a reasonable and civil historical process, powered by inclusive institutions, that produces reasonable people with the prudence to value some fundamentals as the cement of their national formation. Second, fundamentals are not God-given, and what is needed is a dynamic and quality public debate about their significance in building a good nation. In other words, a reasonable nation must know how to debate what is in their best collective interest.

A good nation is, of course, a utopian aspiration or even a myth—perhaps a necessary myth with which to articulate an acceptable national purpose. One way or the other, a nation’s polity, stability, and sense of justice often depend on how maturely it deploys its ideas of fundamentals in

the project of nation-building.

The Greeks first understood this political riddle. At the precipice of a civil war, circa 600 BCE, raging between a landed aristocracy and the peasants who owed it vast debts, Athenian legislator Solon came up with the idea of *eunomia*, an ideal political order that served the interests

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With this long preamble, allow me to turn to current Bangladesh. The country’s political class, unfortunately, has not been able to resolve its *eunomia* challenge. It did not convincingly determine what its historical fundamentals are or *could be* that would remain above fractious political bickering in the years to come.

The political project of what is known in Bangla as *oikyomot* has remained forever elusive. If *oikyomot* points to figuring out the nation’s fundamentals, then it is, of course, not about the end product in the form of untouchable “truths,” but rather about a continuous process of civil discourse with which to reason why some foundational ideas are necessary as a continuous political thread. Consider this example: by the time he was in his second term of presidency, George Washington endured vicious press attacks, questioning his integrity and his administration’s “monarchical” style. But nobody ever set Mount Vernon, Washington’s personal property, on fire. Today, people can write a scathing book on Washington’s treatment of enslaved people in his estate, but nobody burns down the Washington Monument rising from the centre of the US capital. There is no historical dilemma in considering George Washington’s pivotal role in the Constitutional Convention in 1787, a historical fundamental in the idea of the United States of America. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s March 7 speech is one such fundamental in the

idea of Bangladesh. The achievement of 1971 is a foundational concept for this country. The whole point of the planned killing of the country’s intellectuals by anti-liberation forces on December 14, 1971 was to defeat that concept. Ironically, the last regime’s over-Mujibification of the country’s political landscape spawned the wrong kind of debates on 1971.

While fundamentals can be debated across historical eras, they should be neither dismissed nor desecralised in the name of renewal or with the intention of political erasure. The problem in Bangladesh has been that political parties created their own “party fundamentals” that collapsed or were erased with their departure from the government. They weaponised history in their favour. While one party colonised 1971 as its exclusive turf, others showed a peculiar discomfort towards it (even when indulging in its sartorial celebration) or secretly denied its legitimacy. Thus, Bangladesh’s political history has been a history of biased histories that created permanent political fault lines, weakening the promise of developing the nation’s human capital. One cannot expect a mature nation when a misguided culture thrives, one in which people become accustomed to seeing the world from the lens of their narrow self-interests, ignoring the transcendental values of fundamentals in nation-building.

An insurmountable roadblock in Bangladesh has long diminished the possibility of establishing fundamentals as national unifiers. Since independence, the country has carried on with a peculiar birth defect, that is, the secret guilt-ridden binary of 1971 and religion. Despite the euphoria of liberation, in post-independence Bangladesh, many people, beyond the Islamist parties, secretly considered the secession from Pakistan a betrayal of Islam. Even though false—the Liberation War was fought against economic and political marginalisation—this binary continued to influence politics in Bangladesh with different artifices and under different circumstances. In many ways, August 15, 1975, the debate of Bangalee vs Bangladeshi, and partisan debates on secularism, among other examples, are different manifestations of this false binary, which seems to have become entrenched in the national psyche. It has become a culture even though its expression in recent times has become shrouded in mystical and indeterminate pronouncements.

Binaries that entrap us in a black-and-white belief system harm our social and cognitive evolution. What I propose is that some foundational concepts are necessary to anchor a good nation and its ability to live a richly hybrid life. More importantly, to be able to believe in unifying fundamentals, a nation needs maturity, courage, and a willingness to debate its purpose with civility. For that, we need to robustly invest in public education, civic programmes, and social campaigns.