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Electronic ballots: What should Bangladesh do?



PHOTO: STAR
Modernise the system

India's expertise with Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) is being watched with great interest by countries such as Malaysia and the U.K. with a view to introducing similar systems in their countries. Even a technology leader such as the United States mulls whether to go in for e-voting. Bangladesh Election Commission is considering the undertaking of a pilot scheme to evaluate the EVM's usefulness in the context of Bangladesh.

The next general elections in India is likely to take place on or before September 2004 and will be the India's first all-electronic poll, using over 800,000 EVMs, and making photo identity cards mandatory for more than a billion population.

Though India has used e-voting partially in previous elections, it will be the first time a Lok Sabha (central parliament) election will be held in the country since 1952 without the use of ballot papers. The voters and all the political parties have confidence in the e-voting system and necessary precautions have been taken to ensure that no vote stealing, vote stuffing, hijacking of ballot boxes and other unsavoury practices take place during the election.

And, at the recently concluded "International Conference on Democracy" in London, Chief Election Officers of a number of Commonwealth nations evinced keen interest in replicating the Indian experiment of electronic voting. Some of the nations planned to send observers to see the EVMs in action during the next round of Assembly elections in India in October 2003.

But, in the U.S., controversy surrounds a report published on the Internet by researchers at the Information Security Institute of John Hopkins University. Avi Rubin, Technical Director of the Institute and two other colleagues suggested that one of the

electronic voting systems made by a manufacturer (who had secured orders worth over \$ 50 million) fell "far below the most minimal security standards applicable."

They criticised the fact that the programme was written in C++, which they characterised as an unsafe language for such applications. They also faulted the system with the voters providing a smart card to register their votes. One can easily change the embedded programme to allow multiple votes, and, more dangerously, can influence the electronic count. "A 15-year-old could make counterfeit cards in a garage," Mr. Rubin was quoted as saying. The 34-page report in PDF format can be viewed at www.avirubin.com/vote.pdf.

The Indian system, however, requires a manual operation by the voter and does not depend on a smart card that the voter must possess. This effectively insulates the machine from external tampering. When EVMs were first used in India two decades ago in the North Paravur Parliamentary by-elections in Kerala, the loser, A.C. Jose, successfully challenged the result. The courts ordered a re-election but not on the grounds that EVMs could be tampered with.

The Indian experiment is relevant for Bangladesh especially due to the fact that our elections are not far away. We need to check if EVMs are the solution to our problems. We will need to launch a major awareness and training campaign to introduce the EVMs on a large scale in the entire country.

The Dept. of Films and Publication (DFP) should be assigned with the preparation of special films for this purpose. Betar Bangla and the BTV and other print media should be enlisted to provide extensive public interest messages to support this programme.

And, our legislation needs to be changed to permit electronic voting. In this respect, we can take a cue from the Indians, who on March 13, 1989 amended the Representation of People's Act and section 61A was added, approving the recording of votes by using voting machines.

Syed Fazle Bari, On e-mail



Views on US elections

For the third day running (Oct. 4,5,6) we have been subjected to an extended (though very well-written) discussion by Mr. Zafar Sobhan of the 2004 American Presidential campaign and the merits or otherwise of the Democratic party candidates.

What I find disturbing is that a Bangladeshi writer (presumably) has been so taken in by the shadow-play of American politics that he ignores the hard reality of that country's distorted and vicious governing system. Instead of pretending as if the Republican and the Democratic party represent anything more than two sides of the same coin, the writer would have done better to analyse and expose the underlying structural features which remain the same no matter who is occupying the Presidential seat.

Chief among these is the way in which the Zionist elite has so entrenched itself in the US that it has a stranglehold on all major policy initiatives, a power which it ruthlessly uses to further its own narrow advantages.

Another hidden driving force of the American government is of course the group of greedy contractors which benefit from the military Budget, which now stands at more than USD 350 billion. This amount is higher than it ever was during the Cold War. Or, Mr. Sobhan could have elaborated on the ongoing brutal repression of the Black population, of whom more than 20 per cent are kept locked up in jail at any one time for no good reason.

These, and others like them, are the real issues that need to be aired if there is to be any hope of America playing its rightful progressive role in the world.

Rafiqullah Bhuyian
Century Plaza, Maghbazar, Dhaka

Street cesspool and Mayor Khoka

Streets of Dhaka won't be rivers again if freedom fighter Khoka bhai makes a win. But, ironically, it already has happened to some of the streets in the city.

If you do not believe me you can have a jaunt into those streets. The one from Malibag bus stand to Mouchak. You will be aghast to watch the gruesome state of it. I have my doubts if it still can be

called a road or not. You can find all kind of activities there -- even some wonderful acrobatic performances of the "street fighters." In fact it is an exhibition of negligence of our dutiful city corporation officials and of the tolerance of our hardy people.

You may think that we don't have enough money to bring that road to its minimum standard. Think again and look around-how carefully we are decorating those islands "the treasure islands"! We also dream of a magnetic train to take us from Dhaka to Chittagong in an hour when it takes more than an hour to go to Motijheel from Moghbazar. Who cares?

How pragmatic are our policy makers?

Being a citizen of this city, I feel shy not for our poverty but for our irresponsibilities. Mr. Mayor, do any of the above mean anything at all to you?

Samiul Hasan
Moghbazar, Dhaka

"Sex education at schools"

This is with reference to "sex education at schools", a proposal put forward by Dr. Rahim and Tirtho Mahmood through their letters published in the DS recently. Mr. Tirtho Mahmood has given a specific suggestion to start

discussing sex at grade six. Their idea may seem suitable because people practice free-sex these days. But Bangladesh is a country where 90% people are Muslim, having a different life style.

I remember the story of a Nigerian gentleman who was a participant in a training program along with me in a European country. He met a girl with her parents in the lift of the hotel where we were staying during that training. He accompanied them to their room to make small talks and when he noticed that there were only two beds there, he proposed the parents that their daughter can stay in his room as there was an extra bed. The agreement occurred without much hesitation.

He narrated the story to me the next day, which I could not believe although it was true. That was in the year 1981. Today, things have gone a long way.

A few days back, I came to know that a daughter of one of my former colleagues (whom I've not met for more than twenty years) now pursuing her studies in Canada is having a "live-in-relationship" with someone. I do agree that girls and boys like these do need sex education at schools as they come from families that believe in different moral values and their social culture is completely different from those of the general mass of Bangladesh.

Let us not venture into introducing something that will directly / indirectly encourage the school children to be too alert and curious about that part of human life that must, some way or other, be secret to them until they become adult.

The changes that the human bodies go through as they grow up are natural and a normal people can automatically adjust to it without any outside interference. It is not the absence of sexual knowledge and education that is responsible for the unknown and fearful diseases spreading from the so called civilised countries (and definitely none of those diseases originated from a country like Bangladesh).

Our Prophet (mpbuh) predicted the start of such social evils and their associated causes in his sayings 1400 years ago. The simple way to get rid of sexually transmitted diseases (STD) is to lead an Islamic life. The people of other religion can also follow this part of our life as is prescribed in our religion.

I hope our policy makers will be bold and visionary enough to publicise the teachings of Islam from the holy Quran and the sayings of the Prophet in a manner that comes as a solution to all the problems of this world and the hereafter. No human prescription can solve these problems.

Md. Aminul Hoque
Razzaq Mansion, West Zone C, Khalishpur, Khulna

For and against holidays on Saturday-Sunday

As the second anniversary of the assumption of power by the four-party alliance draws closer, people are expecting many more reforms in our national life. One of such expectations is the debate over weekly public holidays.

Considering the social, economic and personal ramifications, I am staunchly in favour of weekly public holidays on Saturday and Sunday, with working hours between 9 a. m to 5 p. m (1-1.30 p. m break between Monday-Thursday and 1-2 p. m break on Fridays). I would like to put forward the following arguments in support of my preference:

Weekly public holidays on Saturday-Sunday would be consistent with the global trend as well as with most countries of South and South-East Asia. It is followed even in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

Office-goers would not face any problem in attending Jumma prayers on Fridays, as there would be a 1-hour break between 1 and 2 p. m.

It would boost the image of the country as a moderate, liberal and pragmatic nation.

It would suit the needs of the country's business community, especially those engaged in global trade, because of identical working days in major trading partners of ours.

It would be economically beneficial, as the logistic and utility expenses of the government would be reduced due to lesser number of working days.

It would be socially beneficial as town-based people would have more opportunity to interact with their village homes and there would be more scope for tourism and excursions within the country.

It would be personally beneficial, especially in terms of health, hygiene and family, as people would be able to cool down after a hard week's work and concentrate more on personal and family matters.

There would be no reduction of weekly working hours and the output at offices would be more focused due to longer working days.

Helal Uddin Ahmed
Senior Editor, Bangladesh Quarterly, Dhaka

Political leadership failed us

As a citizen-voter for several decades, I am not at all happy with the current political culture and the performance of individual politicians, regardless of their political affiliation. They have failed us miserably. I have posed several questions here as a layman, hoping the political leaders would think about it.

The politicians also have to earn their daily bread just like millions other, and this income has to come from outside their political activities. Politics being a kind of voluntary public service, it must not be viewed as a business activity by the majority of the politicians. In our country such a commercialisation of politics is not considered as immoral or unethical. AS such, the output of politics suffers, and there appears to be no point in going to the polls.

What is the difference between a politician and an elected politician, namely and MP? The former is a freelancer, and his PP (public relations) level is less stringent, as he is without any specific agenda and talks in general terms. On the other hand, an MP has to operate within a much narrower and more specific orbit. During his term in the House, he has to produce some measurable results, to continue as a player.



If CPA conference were held abroad!

In my opinion, the main reason for which the opposition Awami League (AL) is not joining the CPA conference is to prove to the world that the present BNP government is not democratic (which I partially agree). Interestingly, the AL is not more democratic than the BNP and did not hesitate to perform state-sponsor terrorism during its tenure in power too.

One thing I am almost certain that the AL would have participated in the same conference only if it were held outside Bangladesh, because, in that case they could use government money to go abroad and their MPs could have chances for shopping for their family members.

We Bangladeshis are unfortunate because by and large our politicians consider foreign countries and their goods or people better than Bangladesh. Irony is, in their utterances they tell the opposite.

Dr. Mahboob Hossain
Assistant Professor, Department of Pharmacy
The University of Asia Pacific, Dhaka

CPA and our image as a nation

The decision of the Awami League to boycott the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Dhaka has raised a question regarding the image of the country. Awami League's decision not to participate in the conference despite the persuasion of its Secretary General, Dennis Marshall, is going to be the first ever incident of boycott in the 92 years' history of this world forum.

It is indeed unfortunate that the Opposition is abstaining from the event when the country is the host. In times of crises and in dealing with matters of national interest such as this one, our intelligence, columnists, including the respected Editor of The Daily Star voiced their opinions through articles and statements in the press.

Sadly, none has come up yet to convince the leader of the opposition to consider the national interest and the image of the Bangladeshi people. Can we humbly request Mr. Mahfuz Anam and the leaders of the civil society to come forward to educate us on this before we lose our patience.

MR
Gulshan, Dhaka

It's very disappointing for all the Bangladeshis that the CPA conference slid to a new low on October 07, 2003 when President of the meeting, Speaker Jamir Uddin Sircar, Secretary Don McKinnon and a Kenyan Deputy Minister for foreign affairs faced embarrassing situations.

On the other hand, the AL has refused to participate in the CPA meet though several attempts

have been made by the CPA officials to ensure its participation.

Both ruling and opposition parties have been playing a dirty politics and drowning the image of Bangladesh to foreign media. Being sure of the oppositions' abstention, our government could cancel the meet as it had cancelled the NAM meet in Dhaka due to financial and other factors. Ruling and opposition parties have frustrated Bangladeshi nationals both at home and abroad. The Kenyan minister, Moses Wetangula, is reported have shouted and screamed due to the lack of a transport to carry him and a phone to converse with others.

Our virtually isolated ruling and opposition parties have no right to disgrace the nation's image before the world media. Who has given them such a mandate to disgrace those invited distinguished guests from around the globe?

Gopal and Shyamali Sengupta
Barclay Avenue, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

It is sad that the AL did not approve to participate in the CPA conference even after personal requests from the President and the General Secretary of the CPA. It reflects AL's political bankruptcy. The government is to be equally blamed for non-participation of the AL.

The success of a Government is measured by its action, not by 'tall talks'. The government has miserably failed in this respect. From the very beginning, they have shown arrogant and cavalier attitude toward the opposition. They have deliberately messed up everything, and the nail in the coffin was put when the Speaker announced the names of five AL MPs without consulting them. I would have thought that our political leaders have minimum decency. But alas! See the quality of our so called leaders! May Allah bless this poor nation!

A conscious citizen
On e-mail

By staying away from the CPA, the Awami League has shown to the world its true colours. It might have embarrassed the BNP, but it has humiliated the country. This is consistent with what the AL leader has been doing since losing power; attempting to embarrass the BNP with her self imagined grievances but successfully ending with damaging our fragile international reputation.

What has BNP's arrogance got to do with the CPA? The responsibility of hosting the CPA meeting was not entrusted to the BNP but to Bangladesh. Any failure to hold the conference properly will embarrass the nation and not the BNP. Even a schoolboy has the common sense to understand this. Unfortunately, the AL has not even shown this much commonsense.

Shahjahan Ahmed
Dhanmandi R/A, Dhaka

An MP has to be an all-rounder. As the situation changes all the time, the MP cannot lag behind. But what is happening now? The opposition is boycotting the parliament for a decade (whatever the reasons). The voters are not getting a fair deal. The voters are not very articulate, and their representatives do not measure up to the task in hand. Not much attention is being paid to overcome this un-professionalism.

Then there is the inherent

communication gap between the Treasury and the Opposition. The gaps are getting wider. Under this circumstance, how can politics and the politicians be useful to the society? The voters must know clearly how to support a political party, otherwise voting has no meaning.

Democracy must operate within a certain recognisable bandwidth, but we are exceeding it. Why? For over a decade, there has been no options in sight, hence the frustration level is very high. And, although there is no external interference, the society is still divided. This cleavage has now extended to the bar association. Marginal differences in a homogeneous society are acceptable, but there is no light at the end of the tunnel. We have become faction-obsessive and friction mongers.

Why this? It is the quality of our leadership who are not capable of improving things. Real leaders would have gotten us faster of this vicious circle. Only the demagogues stick to the 'bottomless basket'.

The quality and style of leadership has to change. But there are no pioneers seen in this field. Is it due to lack of sacrificing spirit the willingness to suffer? The leaders need to adjust to changes much more and faster than the followers. This is not noticeable to the public.

Confidence begets confidence. The grey areas have to be removed. We have to handle sustainable theories to improve our lives, not get

lost in the premature dissipation of energy.

The ball is in the court of the leaders. If they fail to play, someone else will.

Abdud Khan
On-mail

Arifa gets back

At last Arifa, the abducted two-year-old, got back home and this incident will be remembered as a symbol of warm bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. Congratulations to the media, including The Daily Star, for the follow-up news on Arifa. Thanks to the West Bengal government for taking quick decisions and also thanks to the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission office in Kolkata and Mrs. Salma Ali of Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association for quickening the hand over process.

Md. Zillur Rahaman
MSS Economics, BB Hall, DU

Arifa is back in Bangladesh. I was absolutely captivated by her innocent and random speech on BBC. She was abducted a month ago in India. Her parents were shocked at this incident. Her comeback is late due to the work-shy diplomacy of the Bangladesh mission in New Delhi. Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association played a pivotal role to bring her back in Bangladesh. Billions of thanks to Advocate Salma Ali, Executive Director of BNWLA. Molla Mohammad Shaheen
Dept. of English, University of Dhaka

Smooth racket at Dhaka Airport

On 5th October, I arrived from Calcutta by Biman's evening flight at around 7:45 p.m. From my seat in the business class, I was among the first few passengers to reach and cross immigration and go to the incoming baggage conveyor. I was expecting to get my baggage early as business class baggage is normally unloaded first.

Imagine my surprise when the first lot of baggage to come were about fifteen large fibre cloth bags, stitched all round and full of God knows what, being collected on the trolleys by one passenger.

Surprise followed surprise when a uniformed custom officer came up and asked the loaders to carry the baggage through! I watched the whole smooth operation as the conveyor had stopped after this super priority baggage arrival! Normal baggage started coming after around fifteen minutes, if not later. As I had nothing to declare, I passed through the green channel out of the arrival hall. There was no sight of the passenger with his 15 bags of overloaded baggage, or the custom officer. They had all disappeared!

What happened in the open sight and in full transparency for all to see was anybody's guess? It was as smooth an exercise in airport efficiency, as one can imagine! It's a smooth racket.

S A Mansoor
Dhaka

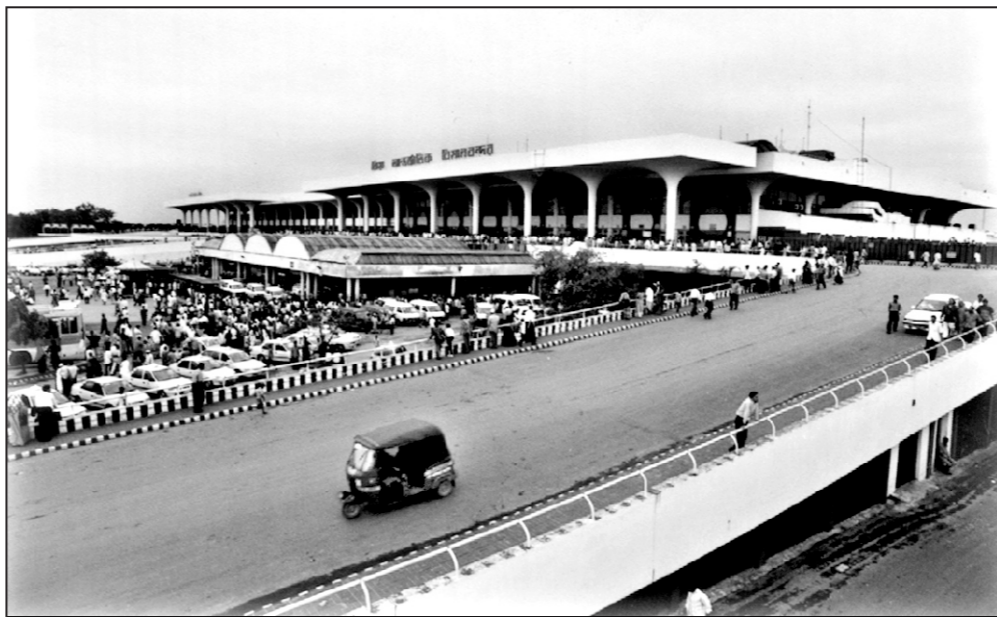


PHOTO: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN