

# Revival of upazila parishad will help elect clean candidates



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

It has been reported in the media that in the meeting of business advisory committee (BAC) held on April 27, the prime minister and leader of the house Begum Khaleda Zia turned down the request of the AL members for setting the duration of the current session (21st session) of parliament to 15 days saying "massive development activities are taking place in the country, so the MPs are busy and they should stay in their respective areas." The non-acceptance of the demand of the AL members to run the session for 15 working days for discussing some burning issues, including price hike of essentials, Kansat killings, electricity crisis, police assault on journalists at Chittagong led them to walk out of the meeting of the BAC in protest.

This lends credence to the following issues: (1) the BNP-led alliance government does not allow the main opposition AL to speak on burning national issues in the parliament; (2) executive functions given to MPs by certain executive orders have taken precedence over the functions and responsibilities assigned to them by the constitution and rules of procedure of parliament (ROP); and (3) involvement of the MPs in development works and non-development activities in their respective constituencies have made the office of the MPs very lucrative financially,

## BARE FACTS

Out of sheer political animosity, the BNP government that came to power in 1991 abolished the upazila parishads (UZPs) introduced by Ershad government in the first-half of the eighties. Headed by a directly elected chairman, a UZP became the focal point of local administration. A UZP was responsible for the administration of the "transferred subjects" which included, inter alia, planning, promotion and executions of development programmes, primary education, health and family planning welfare, various rural infrastructure programmes, and many other functions that could be carried out at the local level.

socially and otherwise.

As ordained by the constitution and the ROP, the main function of the MPs is making laws in parliament. The other functions include: electing a president of the republic; impeaching the president; electing a speaker and deputy speaker of parliament; removing the speaker or the deputy speaker; making/amending the ROP; asking questions in parliament; moving a resolution relating to matters of public interest; and participating in the meetings of the parliamentary standing committees on ministries concerned to investigate or inquire into their activities.

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could be carried out at the local level.

It is not that the upazila system was flawless. But the system was abolished before its teething troubles were over. Kamal Siddiqui in his book "Local Governance in Bangladesh" (2000) writes: "When the BNP government came to power in 1991, the general expectation was that the upazila system would be retained, the existing upazila chairmen would be removed and fresh elections would be held to bring into power genuine representatives of the people. Instead of doing this, the government unfortunately chose to abolish the upazila system, lock, stock and barrel. It was like throwing the baby out with the bath water."

We are familiar with the saying that there cannot be two peers (religious leaders) under the same roof. The abolition of the UZPs, in particular the exit of the directly elected chairmen, paved the way for the entry of the MPs to the stage. Through various administrative orders, the MPs were made advisers to the upazila development and coordination committee (UDCC) and to some other committees of specific nature.

In the absence of the UZPs headed by the elected chairmen, the MPs have become all powerful

in their respective constituencies. An MP must have the last say in all developmental matters within his/her constituency. Local administration has practically surrendered to the MPs, particularly to the MPs belonging to the ruling alliance. Involvement of the MPs in development works brings them money. Muscle can easily be arranged with money. Both money and muscle dominate the elections.

Realising its mistake in abolishing the UZPs, the BNP in its 2001 election manifesto pledged revival of the UZPs. But the pledge has not been implemented. There is hardly any possibility for revival of the UZPs during the remaining days of the BNP-led alliance government. It is learnt that a section of ministers and lawmakers strongly oppose revival of UZPs, fearing that it will lessen the authority of the MPs.

The immediate past AL government passed the upazila parishad act, 1998, for holding elections to the UZPs; but an amendment brought to the act in 2001 by the AL government gave power to the government to defer elections to the UZPs. The AL led 14-party opposition coalition has now pledged to hold elections to the UZPs within a year of formation of government, if voted to power.

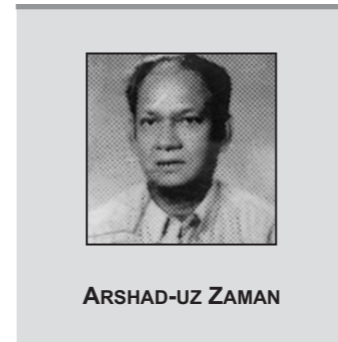
A closer look into the media reports shows that various seminars, symposia, workshops, etc held on local government institutions have been stressing the need for revival of the UZPs. While observing a token hunger strike in the capital on May 3, the Bangladesh Union Parishad Oikya Jote (BUPOJ) demanded immediate elections to UZPs.

An elected UZP with jurisdiction over formulation and implementation of development projects, management of primary education, health and family welfare and other activities at the local level will be the centre of all attraction. Corrupt politicians and holders of black money will fight for the office of the UZP chairman to take precedence over all other persons in his upazila and to recoup the money spent in the election.

As result of fighting for the posts of UZP chairmen by the corrupt politicians and the holders of black money, the political parties, particularly the major parties, may find no alternative but to field clean candidates in the general elections. Anyhow, people well known for their honesty, erudition and competence may find a level playing field for contesting in the parliamentary elections in their constituencies. This may be a big leap forward towards achieving the civil society's objective of nominating honest and competent persons in the general elections by the political parties.

Abdul Latif Mondal former secretary to the government.

# Elections in Britain



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

ALTHOUGH the recently concluded local elections in Britain have hit the headlines, the element of surprise is really absent. We have been so accustomed to see British Prime Minister and leader of the Labour Party Tony Blair win handily that the extent of the defeat may have come as a surprise.

Tony Blair is serving Britain as Prime Minister for the third consecutive term. And he is only 53! Rather than keeping his probable successor Gordon Brown, the Finance Secretary in suspense Blair has declared that he does not intend to be a candidate for the fourth term. In fact everything seems to be going according to plan for him.

The toughest time that Blair has faced so far is the now famous Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) with which fallen dictator Saddam Hussein of Iraq was capable of striking at targets including as far away as Britain. Of course this turned out to be a figment of imagination of the people surrounding Blair. The epithet of 'liar' has unfortunately stuck with Blair.

What has given Tony Blair a relatively smooth sailing is the absence of a credible opposition. Lately the main opposition party, the Tory, has fielded a leader, who is very young, appears forceful. In all likelihood he will

## THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

Interestingly not much is being heard about Blair the 'poodle' of Bush. The truth is that there are very special friendship between Britain and the US. In fact when the chips are down British tilt towards the US is noticeable vis a vis the European Union (EU). Can we forget former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher coming out of 10 Downing Street, bag in hand and announcing loud and clear her support for her friend US President Ronald Reagan?

face Gordon Brown in 2010, if Blair does not choose to step down earlier. In fact pressure is rising inexorably for Tony Blair to step down.

Tony Blair has been Prime Minister of Britain for more than twelve years. In the nineties when Tony Blair appeared on the political horizon of Britain he was in his early forties and full of vigour. He brought a young team with him and literally reinvented what came to be known as New Labour. It meant effectively doing away with the usual left wing jargons associated with leftist ideas of the traditional Labour. What Blair has done successfully is that he has brought his party in the centre ground, which after all is the most fertile ground in any country that practices election politics.

The local election results is due to the inevitable wear and tear with time. Added to this is several scandals that have reared their heads. Tony Blair has rightly brought about important changes within his Cabinet. These are inevitable cosmetic changes. However it seems unlikely that he will be able to completely silence his detractors. Interestingly not much is

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The local elections debacle is no signal that Britain is about to turn to the Conservative Tory. For the last two general elections the Tories have failed to field a credible candidate against Tony Blair, who has proved himself a master campaigner and leader of high stature. Between now and 2010 the young Conservative leader Cameron will have to prove that he can be handed over the reins of power. The contest is bound to be tough and would be very engaging. This is no time to bet.

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# Rectifying the electoral roll

The total increase of voters on the new list is around 1.65 crore, about 22 per cent higher than the number on the list prepared in 2000, which is highly unusual. In the existing roll, 57.53 per cent of the then 13 crore population, 7.48 crore, were registered as voters, while the new draft list has over 65 per cent of the 14 crore present population as voters. The ratio of voters to population in the draft list is much higher than those in all the rolls prepared since 1970.

SADRUL HASAN MAZUMDER

DEMOCRATIC election systems require a good electoral roll, which has been prepared following certain criteria and mechanism for identifying eligible voters and preventing ineligible persons from voting. Such a mechanism helps in guaranteeing the "one person one vote" principle.

It is the accurate electoral roll which is the fundamental document of setting up a good election and on the basis of which the election officials identify fake or false voters during the election day. Thus, fair and democratic elections completely depend on the accuracy of the electoral roll.

The right of all adult citizens to participate in the affairs of the government is one of the corner-stones of democracy. As the foundation stone of democracy, the integrity and accuracy of the voter roll are of paramount importance. An underage voter may creep into the electoral roll, but it is unardonable to disenfranchise any eligible voter by exclusion of his/her name from the electoral roll. The Election Commission (EC)

has recently published the draft voter list which has listed a total number of 9,13,14,592 voters. The EC has not mentioned the figures of male and female voters, and the publishing date of the final list due to acute indiscipline in coordinating the total process.

The total increase of voters on the new list is around 1.65 crore, about 22 per cent higher than the number on the list prepared in 2000, which is highly unusual. In the existing roll, 57.53 per cent of the then 13 crore population, 7.48 crore, were registered as voters, while the new draft list has over 65 per cent of the 14 crore present population as voters.

The ratio of voters to population in the draft list is much higher than those in all the rolls prepared since 1970. In addition, although posting voter lists for public scrutiny is mandatory, it has been reported in a number of national dailies that no lists were displayed at the EC Secretariat in Dhaka and election offices in Chittagong, Moulvibazar, Jessore, and other districts.

One of the leading daily reports that "the field level works of the fresh voter listing were frequently inter-

fered by the ruling alliance activists. Many quarters have alleged that ruling alliance men inserted huge numbers of fake voters on the list."

Perhaps the most fundamental form of participation is the right to vote in free and fair elections. The ability to exercise the democratic right to vote is premised on the existence of a comprehensive and inclusive voter roll, which is rigorously maintained to ensure, as much as possible, that each eligible citizen is registered to vote.

Electoral roll is the fundamental component of any voting system. Enrollment procedure therefore need to strike the right balance between the need to be rigorous to ensure integrity of the rolls, and the need for flexibility to ensure that people's right to enroll and vote are protected.

Controversies over the electoral roll have existed for the last few elections in our country. But the recent performance of the Chief Election Commission regarding preparation of the electoral roll not only creates confusion about the accuracy of the voter list but also lessens the confidence of the general people in the neutrality of the EC

itself. Controversies and complaints raised by different actors during the preparation of the draft roll clearly indicate lack of confidence in the accuracy of the electoral roll. Thus, the EC must concentrate on rectifying the electoral roll for holding the election in a free and fair manner.

The political parties should play a complementary role with the EC for holding the election in a free, fair, and impartial manner, and make the outcome of the election credible and acceptable to all.

The civil society organisations along with the NGOs should also come forward with more boldness to establish an independent EC free from political interference. Initiative of the civil society and NGOs can help bridge the gap between the political parties and the EC.

The NGOs can successfully help government institutions in solving most of the national crisis. In this regard, Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA), like some other civil society initiatives, has already set up some examples. FEMA has been vigorously advocating for electoral reform since its inception and contributing to the process of holding a free and fair election in the country. FEMA's contribution in increasing the public confidence over the electoral process is unprecedented.

The EC should seriously consider involvement of Election Monitoring Organisations (EMOs) like FEMA in updating and correcting the electoral roll by engaging its countrywide network of volunteers. Definitely, involvement of a non-partisan EMO

in the process of preparing and updating the electoral roll would help increasing its level of acceptance to the political parties and the general voters. Besides, public consultation about the ways and means of preparing an accurate and acceptable voter list is one exercise where the EMOs can contribute a lot.

During the registration period, a good number of people get an excellent opportunity to involve in the electoral process as volunteers with specific responsibilities. These responsibilities may include initiating voter education campaign encouraging the people to register as voter, monitoring the conduct of the government officials and implementing a system to process complaints regarding preparation of the voter list. These activities, including identification of probable problems in the process of registration, can substantially enhance the quality of the electoral roll.

Moreover, the importance of the pre-election environment monitoring, including the process of nomination and its successful contribution towards holding a free and fair election, suggests for monitoring of the process of preparing the electoral roll. Monitoring of the electoral process for ensuring a free, fair and credible election cannot be limited to monitoring on election day only. The controversies surrounding the preliminary electoral roll and its finalisation demand inclusion of the monitoring of the process of preparing and finalising the electoral roll under the long-term observation program by the EMOs like FEMA.



Another important issue to be addressed is ensuring the right to franchise of the expatriate Bangladeshis. Non-resident Bangladeshis, numbering 2.5 million, engaged in different jobs abroad are still considered ineligible to exercise their franchise in national and other elections. The EC, however, stopped the process of including the expatriates, mentioning that it was not realistic. Once the expatriates are included in the voter list, it will be a must for the EC to take necessary arrangement for casting their votes, which is not possible in the conventional system. Relevant laws need to be amended for ensuring the expatriates' right to franchise.

The EC however can seriously consider the following issues with a view to rectifying the electoral roll:

-Involving EMOs to monitor/check the electoral roll throughout the country, particularly in areas where there were serious allegations.

-Verifying the accuracy of the



information on the voters' lists by conducting sample survey following a statistically accepted method.

-To identify extreme changes in the number of registrants in a region, the current electoral roll can be compared with that of the previous elections.

-Various computer applications can be used for the existing election database to determine duplicate registrations and the registration of ineligible voters.

The Election Commission should consider formation of a vigilance team comprising the volunteers from various EMOs and representatives of various political parties. These teams will be engaged in scrutinising the electoral roll of the respective areas under direct supervision of the election officials. The EC should go for immediate implementation of such a program for timely and effective completion of their activities resulting in an accurate electoral roll accepted to all.

Generally, the EC ought to have its



own permanent personnel who would specialise in election related

jobs and remain to serve the EC while top executives (Secretary, Additional Secretary, etc) may be brought in

from the civil bureaucracy. The EC should also hire consultants from amongst former/retired officers of the

EC who have previous experience of handling election related issues and problems. Experience has no substitute.

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# Let PCBs boost industries and agriculture

Let us try to groom our national development and long term investments for sustainability. This will foster employment in the sectors of funding. Also the private sector will grow faster. The income tax rate may also be related to the banks' treatment and finance of the core sector at large. This is because these are investment hungry sectors and will reduce import by substituting it with production lines providing

MASHI MALIK CHOWDHURY

THE private commercial banks (PCBs) in our economy are less than 25 years old. AB Bank, Islami Bank, National Bank and City Bank probably made their debut only in 1984 or thereafter. They are called the first generation banks. These banks have contributed substantially to our economy, augmented credit lines, generated employment in them and their borrowers. Also the new credit lines have opened up many new

employment opportunities for our masses. These banks opened our vision in the way that not only multi-national banks (MNBs) but other PCBs can contribute even more. Apart from profit motive these have performed some corporate social responsibilities also. However, these banks in view of the simplistic overview of Bangladesh Bank (BB) took advantage of huge benefits for the promoter directors and thereby deprived borrowers. All these led to huge outstanding balance of loans

on default. In fact, the default culture initiated and fostered by post-1975 military-geopolitical regimes within the national commercial banks (NCBs) were extended to the domain of these PCBs.

Many people became neo-rich in absence of accountability failure of BB to monitor and control their affairs of banking operation. The powerful borrowers accumulated lot of wealth plundered from defaulted portfolio and the word "ODpoli" meaning rich by borrowing became popular to imply them. This is

because they borrowed in large amounts of tens of millions for business and industries taking advantage of the loopholes or absence of credit control measures of BB. Also they made fortunes out of overinvoicing of prices for imported machines for industries, overvaluing lands mortgaged to banks etc, all in connivance of crooked bankers who in fact advised these borrowers. These get-rich-quick culture soon contaminated our society. As new and subsequent governments came to power new banks continued to come up during 1991 to 1996, 1996 to 2001 and thereafter and even now hearsay prevails that more new banks are expected soon.

These PCBs are obviously performing high on profit for the shareholders. These banks were fostered by and came out on political backing just like new private TV channels are reportedly mostly fostered by political leaders of

power regimes. The did not have to show business career to substantiate their capability.

The motive of these banks are only profit. But most of them are in win-win situation. They offer their funds to trading avenues which is indeed transforming our economy into an import based nation. With more and more import over the years the gap between export earning and import financing is getting wider. The balance of payment has been gradually getting worse over the years. These banks had little to offer for agriculture and industries.

This is because there is no mandatory terms on those banks for financing industries, agriculture and service sector enterprises. Neither these banks have any rural banking network nor are they required to finance SMEs, rural development enterprises etc. Even in financing industries these banks take resort to hobnobbing and eventually the

efforts to get finance by new industrial entrepreneur do not see the sunlight. These PCBs only go for trade financing to reap quick profit and does not have any commitment for meeting national goals and corporate social responsibilities. If these banks could be brought under compelling finances for agriculture, industries and service sectors, development thinkers opine that, value addition to our economy could be augmented at a faster pace. As a matter of fact, PCBs are currency under tightrope monitoring by BB and value additions could be easier than before.

The profit motive of PCBs is paying some benefit to shareholders, employees, government in the mode of taxes. But this is not adding momentum to long-term sustainable development. On the contrary, huge outlay of their deposits are put in import trade to intensify propensity to consumerism. This leads to a vanity of consuming more even by

the low-income citizens and in the process adds momentum to corruption. The demonstration effect brings in new avenues for consumption available at our doorsteps. The chain effects of increasing propensity to consume aggravates corruption to acquire new funds to buy more demand for import etc. Resultantly foreign currency (FC) for imports falls short and all these have contributed to the overvalue of dollar, wrongly termed by many as dollar crisis and undervalue of Taka. The reform prescription in the name of high foreign currency reserve requirements has successfully perplexed the boatman of the economy to a misconception, which is deferring or slowing down our sustainable growth on a prolonged basis.

It is high time for our economy that the PCBs are brought to book of rules. They must be asked to mandatorily have quota for financing industrial growth, agricultural

promotion and service sector improvement. They should be allowed to spend not more than 30 per cent of funds for imports. These quantum may vary based on their export sector financing performance and the efficacy in financing the above core sector enterprises. All the way industry and agriculture should get top priority. Let us try to groom our national development and long term investments for sustainability. This will foster employment in the sectors of funding. Also the private sector will grow faster. The income tax rate may also be related to the banks' treatment and finance of the core sector at large. This is because these are investment hungry sectors and will reduce import by substituting it with production lines providing a home grown strategy for development.

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