

Draft voters' list controversy

EC must clear misgivings

EVER since the draft voters' list has been made public by the Election Commission (EC), we have been regularly reporting flaws that existed in it. Not only the list contained names of a large number of extra voters, it included those of stranded Pakistanis (who later protested such inclusion) and of Rohingyas. Also names of people of villages that have long been devoured by the rivers in the area found their way in to the draft list. But, to our utter surprise, despite appeal from all quarters for taking immediate steps to correct the wrong entries and remove other inaccuracies, the EC chose to keep silent and distance itself from the media. Such behaviour of the officials of the EC including the Chief Election Commissioner has only contributed to increasing confusion and mistrust in the minds of the people.

Recently it was revealed by Channel-i and later reported in other print media, that as many as 899 false names have been sent by some election officials to the Assistant Registration Officer (ARO) of DCC Ward No 41 Aminul Huq Bhuiyan, who is a teacher of Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Government High School, for inclusion in the list. But on suspicion the ARO refused to include the fake names and for this non-compliance he claimed to have received threatening phone calls from some unknown people. It has been further exposed that the enumerator who had filled the registration forms did not receive the required permission to do the job and on top of that he had submitted false credentials as a teacher of a local school. But, on the other hand, the EC Secretariat claimed to have found the existence of those 899 voters in Ward No. 41 of West Agargaon after an investigation and has asked Aminul to return the registration forms.

The number of alleged fake voters in this case may appear to be small but it has to be taken with due seriousness. The issue of restoring faith in the people about the transparency of works of the EC is in question here. And it goes without saying that the EC will not be able to hold a free and fair election with a flawed voter list. Therefore, all efforts must be given by the EC officials to rectify the mistakes and come up with a revised voters' list acceptable to all.

Names of land grabbers

Ministry must furnish them

IT takes us by surprise that the land ministry failed to supply the list of people who have grabbed government land to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Land Ministry even after being specifically asked to do so. From the report in The Daily Star on Friday it becomes clear that though the ministry officials were informed on March 14 about the agenda for the next meeting, they could not produce the list of influential people who have illegally taken possession of government land. One cannot really blame the parliamentary body for expressing anger at the inefficiency of the officials involved with the land survey task and for failing to come up with the updated list.

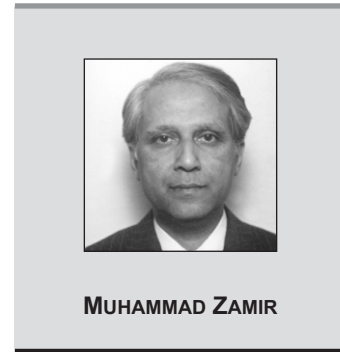
The surprising part of the story is that the land ministry itself had furnished statistics from time to time in the past on the land grabbing incidences. Therefore, it is not clear why the officials could not meet the terms knowing fully well the gravity of the issue.

Grabbing of government land is a malaise that apparently refuses to go away no matter what measures are taken by the relevant law enforcing authorities including the ministry concerned. The situation has turned from bad to worse in the past years with reckless grabbing of land, forests and wetlands by people close to power across the country.

We appreciate the initiative taken by the Parliamentary Standing Committee to unearth the extent of land grabbing and the people behind the illegal activities. We urge the committee to delve further and get to the bottom of this land-grabbing phenomenon. At the same time we would like to stress that the ministry concerned in no way can take it lightly and fail to submit the required list. It constitutes a contempt of the parliament.

INDIAN ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

Left leads, Congress and DMK follow



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

I was in Calcutta during the recent Indian State Assembly elections and watched with interest the unfolding political drama. Citizens in five states West Bengal, Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry went to the polls on 11 May underlined the Left's pre-eminence. In their own way, they re-affirmed fairness and principles of democracy.

The outcome did not spring any major surprise. There was however Communist euphoria over sitting West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's sweeping electoral success within his own state. At the same time, there was acknowledgement from the Left Front Chairman, Mr Biman Bose that the Leftists had won 'only a little more than 50 per cent of the vote. In fact, it received 50.24 per cent of the votes in contrast to 48.99 per cent the last time round in 2001. This humility was balanced by others within the Communist front who were keen to point out that this time the popular percentage support for the Trinamul Congress, their perpetual bete-noir had declined to 28.53 per cent as compared to 38.95 per cent in 2001.

The Left Democratic Front came to power in Kerala by dealing a severe blow to the Congress-led



'The Statesman' (published from Kolkata) in its editorial of 12 May, has significantly stated "Marxists would prefer to view political success and failure in ideological and organisational terms, and would say that the projection of personalities is the hall mark of bourgeois parties. But even diehard ideologues will concede that the Left Front sweep in West Bengal is largely attributable to an individual, Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, and the brand of communism or capitalism, he has come to represent."

UDF, winning 98 seats in the 140-member Assembly. The DMK-Congress alliance wrested power in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. In Tamil Nadu, known for landslide victories (achieved alternately by the two Dravidian parties), Ms Jayalalitha's AIADMK was ousted from power but the victor DMK fell short of a majority by about 15 seats in a House of 234.

The incumbent Congress suffered a setback in Assam in their quest for securing majority, but emerged as the single largest party. It may be recalled that the Congress had won a clear majority in Assam in 2001, but this time there was a split verdict. The Congress will now have to look for allies within the Bodo party and the Assam United Democratic Front headed by Mr Badruddin Ajmal.

This erosion in support for the Congress in Assam has, quite predictably, led to comments about Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's style in politics. It is now being openly suggested that he is being seen as aloof and needs to refashion himself as being 'more responsive to people's needs and aspira-

tions.' It is also being hinted that he needs a 'stronger' political presence to interface with the party (Congress) and get independent feedback. This anxiety has surfaced given the fact that the Congress will face another slew of Assembly elections next year in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. Coming back to West Bengal, analysis indicates that Mamata Banerjee of Trinamul Congress appears to have got her figures drastically wrong. The 'people's majahot' against the Left did not materialise. The results now indicate that even a combined Opposition of the Congress, Trinamul Congress and the BJP would not have been able to knock the Left out of power in these elections. These polls have reaffirmed once again the declining popularity of Trinamul. This trend has been consistent with their poor performance in the Lok Sabha elections in 2004, when the percentage of their votes dropped by 8.85 per cent in comparison with the 1999 parliamentary polls.

The results also underlined that

Mamata's choice of the BJP, and not the Congress, as the alliance partner has cost her heavily. It is now being estimated that the alliance with the BJP had cost her a large share of the Muslim votes, especially in urban, semi-urban and industrial areas. Analysts have mentioned that the Left's clean sweep in the industrial belt in North 24 Parganas, Howrah and Hooghly, where there are large populations of Urdu-speaking Muslims, seems to indicate this. Her assumption that the Congress would further shrink under the weight of her politics has been proved wrong.

Compared to Trinamul, the Congress's performance in West Bengal has not been that bad. Its tally and its vote could have gone up higher had it not fared so badly in its two strongholds of Malda and Murshidabad.

Another interesting facet came out from the West Bengal election. The agrarian belts of north and south Bengal voted for the Left as enthusiastically as the industrial areas in Howrah, Hooghly, North 24 Parganas and Burdwan. This, for the first time, confirmed the Left's

comprehensive resurgence throughout West Bengal.

The Statesman (published from Kolkata) in its editorial of 12 May, has significantly stated "Marxists would prefer to view political success and failure in ideological and organisational terms, and would say that the projection of personalities is the hall mark of bourgeois parties. But even diehard ideologues will concede that the Left Front sweep in West Bengal is largely attributable to an individual, Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, and the brand of communism or capitalism, he has come to represent." The buzz-word here is 'capitalism.' One anticipates that in more ways than one, efforts will now be undertaken within West Bengal to woo greater foreign direct investment in areas like agro-processing, telecommunications and information technology. One presumes that this will be seen as consistent by the middle class and the rich urban Bengal who have become new converts to the Left and now want the Communists to be more flexible.

The highlight of Bhattacharjee's success is the legitimacy it gives to successive victories of the Left Front since 1977. This victory under close scrutiny of the Election Commission also rids the Left of charges of rigging that has hounded them over the years. One thing is transparent from these elections. Constituents of the UPA amalgam ruling in New Delhi have received renewed backing from their constituents, but it is also evident that underneath the surface, because of the Left's popularity, there will be some effort to effect changes in the power equations at the Centre among the UPA partners. It is also clear that after the conclusion of the current session of

the Indian parliament, the Congress headed by the massively re-elected Mrs Sonia Gandhi (from her Rae Bareilly constituency) will have to engage the Left afresh on pension reforms and FDI in the retail sector, the two issues that the Indian Prime Minister wants to move forward. Congress also realises that now there will have to be more give and take with the Left.

The election results have also established very clearly that alliances and coalitions are inevitability for the Congress, both at the Centre and increasingly in the States.

It is also very obvious that the Tamil Nadu result has made it virtually impossible for an alternative government to be formed in the 14th Lok Sabha. The BJP and some regional parties have tried a few times in the last two years to see if an alternative coalition to the UPA can be forged in New Delhi. This was contingent on the DMK switching sides. Now such a possibility has become remote given the fact that the DMK will be dependent on the Congress to run the government in Chennai (with a strong Jayalalitha in the opposition). Such an adventurist posture consequently will be less likely.

Nevertheless, the emboldened Left will definitely keep the Indian Prime Minister under pressure. Congress leaders like Ajit Jogi and other dissatisfied elements will also continue to seek and propose the presence of a 'political' Prime Minister. Dr Manmohan Singh will have to tread a fine line between now and the rest of his term.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador who can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

Dialogue or demonstration: Which way now?

With western style democracy every one wants to play an underdog. Bangladesh democracy is not a western democracy, thus, this does not apply here. In other words, with an existing uneven pitch full of grass, the opposition team has no other choice but to ball odd bouncers to the extent that the rules of the game have not been broken. It remains to be seen how the restless players of the government team can convert the bouncers into 4s and 6s.

DR MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

IN every democracy, liberal or otherwise, the political temperature rises during the election year. In the last three general elections this also had been witnessed in Bangladesh. The rise of political temperature can be viewed in several terms: increase in political violence, frequent call for general strikes (hartal), organisation of mammoth public meetings and so on. Also, the 'war of words' between political leaders is an everyday occurrence at the time of election to raise political mercury. It is not an exception this time as well. However, if the war remains within words rather than lethal weapons, the nation would be heaving a sigh of relief. Unfortunately, things sometimes get too violent and get out of control.

These days politicians of all persuasions have been experiencing an extraordinary hard time. All agree, however, that only way out of the present situation is a dialogue between the two large political forces. However, it looks now a remote possibility since all hopes of

a dialogue has been dashed in a meeting of the government's kitchen cabinet few days ago.

The dialogue proposal of the PM is now turning into a bloody demonstration. How have we arrived to this situation is well known. When the PM extended the olive branch towards the opposition (after failing earlier on the issue of terrorism) in terms of resolving the election reform issues proposed by the opposition leader in the parliament, it looked publicly though that the ice has broken, the two rivals at the end will sit down and resolve all the differences for the greater interest of the nation.

Since then, what happened, once again, is well known. At this moment, the age old blame game surfaced again. The BNP Secretary General, Mannan Bhuiyan, on the other day in Mymensingh has said, the opposition never wanted dialogue since now they abandoned this on a lame excuse and resorted to anarchy. The AL General Secretary, Abdul Jalil, in reply, made it clear that the government was never serious of any dialogue with the opposition instead, the

dialogue proposal from the government quarter is a ploy to destroy the ongoing movement surrounding the election reform agenda. He also made it clear that the opposition will resist holding any election with the support of the people, if the reform agenda have not been met.

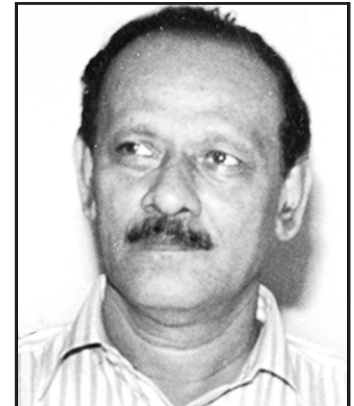
Whom to believe, Secretary General Bhuiyan or General Secretary Jalil? Both of them are highly regarded politicians in the eyes of the people. In the case of Bhuiyan, one may however raise a point that, if the government was serious about the dialogue, as a senior member of the cabinet Bhuiyan should have been included in the negotiating team. Abdul Jalil seems more reassuring and he may even throw a challenge to the opponents by borrowing from Carme de, "oppression can only survive through silence".

Under these circumstances, the dialogue is a remote possibility and the opposition, of course, ended up with the choice of demonstration. It came to media recently that, the government is also ready for facing any eventualities. They even threatened to

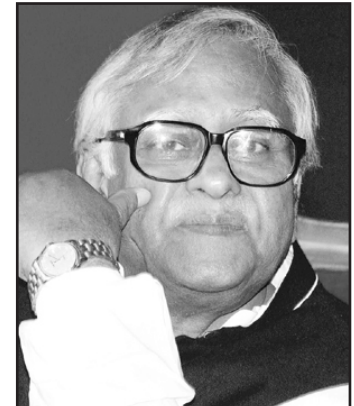
stage a counter demonstration with the support of the people. In other words, we like it or not, confrontation in the street is the way forward. As an observer of this game like many readers, one would be curious about asking, where the people stand in this milieu?

Observing the game from a distance, one would end up with two possible conclusions. The drama now by all means is a game of nerves. The team that breaks down first will have to go back to the pavilion as looser. Let us make an analogy. The government team and its captain, on the one hand, expect that the people after some time will become fed-up with the opposition's demonstration programmes and will turn their backs to the opposition and the ultimate victory is there's. On the other hand, the opposition team and the captain believe that the demonstration is not only geared towards capturing power legitimately, it is also about making the people empowered against the misuse of any future governments.

As a humble part of the spectators, our purpose here is not to take any position since the readers would know, nowadays like the game of cricket, there are three umpires in the political arena: the CTG, the EC and, of course, the law and order enforcing agencies. At this moment, one can, however, be convinced that (would be) chief of the CTG and the CEC in turn are going to play a role of a 12th man



BNP Secretary General Bhuiyan



AL General Secretary Jalil

Whom to believe? of the government team. It is, however, not known now what the third umpire is going to do.

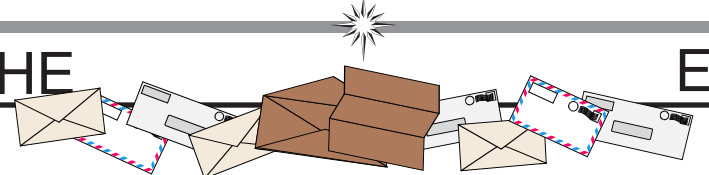
In summary, at this moment, one can say that the game is almost equally poised since both the teams have almost equal number of supporters, at least, from the view points of number of cadres and their godfathers. The government team has an inherent advantage of having the police under its fold. This cannot be said in the case of civil administration since, from the latest count, almost half of this mob did not receive any pat on their backs from the incumbent during the last four and a half years. The opposition team, although currently looks like an underdog, could bounce back any moment if the price of essentials keep rising at the same pace.

One must remember that, with

western style democracy every one wants to play an underdog. Bangladesh democracy is not a western democracy, thus, this does not apply here. In other words, with an existing uneven pitch full of grass, the opposition team has no other choice but to ball odd bouncers to the extent that the rules of the game have not been broken. It remains to be seen how the restless players of the government team can convert the bouncers into 4s and 6s. If the last four and a half years is a guide, there is a good chance of the government team failing to make hook shots without breaking the rules, consequently risking being falling apart.

Dr Moazzem Hossain is a freelance contributor.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Police reform

Needless to say, the police force of Bangladesh is in shambles. For the betterment of the nation, some corrective measures should be taken to rectify the stigmatised police force of the country. There are myriad of shortcomings. I read the articles of Muhammad Zamir and Muhammad Nurul Huda published in The Daily Star on April 29, written on the police force of Bangladesh exhaustively. These two veteran civil servants have diagnosed some crucial drawbacks of police force. They also have prescribed some important therapies to correct and rejuvenate the force.

Police force is very essential to maintain law and order in the country. Certainly, render a backbreaking service for the country. But they stigmatised for rampant corruption and abuse of power. It is true that our police force lacks etiquette and exploits its hectoring power. Our police force is highly politicised. They are used as the political weapon to marginalise the political antagonists. Through the police's work is laborious and challenging, their perks are not commensurate with their service. The police force lacks proper in-service training. For this they are not people friendly and

the antagonism between the police and the public is stark.

To modernise the police force and make it service-oriented the government should take some effective steps on urgent basis. The police force should be depoliticised and decriminalised first. The remuneration as well as other fringe benefits should be enhanced. All types of political meddling and dictation in policing should be halted. More high-ranking officials should be recruited to bring efficiency and professional prowess. They should be refurbished with sophisticated weapons to cope with terrorists and felons. The intelligence wing in police force should be upgraded with technical and professional paraphernalia and know-how. Overseas training is very vital for the high-ups.

I hope the government will address this burning issue with utmost sincerity and immediacy to minimise the crime and bring normalcy in public life. But if the prevailing situation perpetuates, the police force of our country will fall in jeopardy.

Molla Mohammad Shaheen
Dept of English, DU

Modern viceroys!
Pakistan is said to have a secret

godfather viceroy, according to the analysis of a veteran Indian columnist (DS, Feb 8). He apprehends similar situation in India (her foreign policy dictated by a foreign power!).

As a Bangladeshi (desi and trying to be patriotic), I won't be surprised if similar background is subtly being created in Dhaka for controlling the country's resources and strategic locations. Foreign vested groups do not want influence of fundamentalists in administration and policy making. The advise on fair general elections. Our political leaders seem to be in a state of maasit.

A Mahasen
Dhaka

Battle of non-issues!

As a voter for over 50 years in three nations, I cannot but the unique concept of temporary caretaker government to take care of the general elections practiced no where in the world!

What are the credentials, and performance originating from the idea? For whom? Not for the honest and simple voters!

When two dishonest groups quarrel, who benefit? Those who do not get the benefit of the doubt go to power! What hypocrisy?

Reform political culture, rather than the voting mechanics.

How about a debate at non-political level?

Dhaka

Election propoganda by the EC

Election Commission should take the responsibility of election propoganda for the candidates instead of the candidates themselves.

This will help a low-cost, violence-free, black money-free election propoganda. The EC can take a service charge from the candidates for this propoganda (say, for example, Tk 5 lakh from each candidate).

This will also help the law and order in the country, as pre-election violence rises in our country and elsewhere in the world during elections because of the election propoganda by the candidates themselves --as their supporters sometimes break the rules and it is run by black money and other undue influences.

I request CPD to arrange a dialogue on this issue to help formulate a working plan for a better election system.

EC should hire the IT and radio and TV facilities for election propoganda.

It will save our time, and ensure safety of lives of voters and candidates as well -- and of course cut down the propoganda costs.

Mohammed Hassanul Alam
Mirpur

Myanmar-India gas pipeline

Mr. Jashim Uddin Khan's report published on May 09 in your newspaper on Importing Gas from Myanmar by India has really shocked me to see how we missed the opportunity and failed to respond timely in the interest of the country.

We should compare what we are to lose and gain because of this deal. It is not like transport in which we may fear even of spreading AIDS in our country. It is not even bilateral export and import deal where India will take unilateral benefit, which we can't manage. It is a case of unilateral benefit for our country to get revenue between US\$ 125 million and US\$500 million per annum as transit fees from both India and Myanmar. While Pakistan is willing to allow

gas pipeline from Iran to India, why are we indifferent in this regard, which is directly related to our country's interest?

It was reported in your newspaper that "a high level Indian delegation last week in Yangon requested the Myanmar government to finalise a route out of six alternatives all of which proposed to bypass Bangladesh. India might finally decide to bypass Bangladesh in importing gas from Myanmar since Bangladesh has been sitting idle for the last 15 months regarding a tri-nation gas pipeline."

Why are we failing in our diplomacy in this case? Can't we isolate this special case of unilateral benefit from other bilateral issues for sake of the country?

Your paper reported "A draft memorandum of understanding (MOU) among India, Myanmar and Bangladesh was signed in February 2005 for construction of the proposed tri-nation gas pipeline to carry gas from Myanmar to India through Bangladesh territory. A tri-nation techno-commercial meeting with representatives from all the three countries signed the draft MOU in Yangon."

Your paper also quoted the latest position of our Ministry.

"We have nothing to do if India or Myanmar does not invite us to join the pipeline. We have intentions to join the pipeline but India should consider the trade deficit between the two countries and other bilateral issues," a Bangladeshi high official of the ministry of energy said.

When MOU was signed, why do we need invitation again for the deal? We must rush for the deal where country has benefit. We should give letters of invitation to both India and Myanmar indicating our willingness to consider gas pipeline through Bangladesh. If required special delegation from Prime Minister will visit both the countries.

As a member of SAARC forum, we are discussing lots of issues with India, but failed to show our interest in cross-country gas pipeline. We may try to blame India that India wants to settle every issue in a bilateral way, which is not in favour of us. But this is a project of tri-nation pipeline. How did our ministry fail to keep track of it in 15 months? Is this a case like submarine cable connection? But here there is no scope of second chance, if India and Myanmar once decided to bypass Bangladesh.

Few days back, we all saw the US president in Indian capital. He came to make deal with India on nuclear issue. That was a deal in the interest of USA. Didn't we see Prime Minister of Bangladesh visited the Middle East recently to get some benefit for the country? If required, the Prime Minister could visit both the countries for this special deal.

Some may think of exporting gas if pipeline is there. This will not happen, as we have no surplus gas to export. We are not even sure to supply gas to TATA in an uninterrupted way. Rather in case of need, we may buy gas if pipeline is there within our land.

I like to request our Ministry concerned, including the Ministry of Finance to arrange for a high level delegation to visit both India and Myanmar to settle this deal. Please allow us to get some benefit from cross-country gas pipeline. This may reduce the balance of payment, too.

Engr. Azizul Huq
Green Road, Dhaka