

## Civil society

**FROM PAGE 1** minority communities can come to polling centres and cast votes without any fear.

Nagorik Committee 2006 organised the dialogue as part of a civil society campaign for honest and dedicated candidates in the 2007 election. Former finance minister M Syeduzzaman moderated the dialogue on Election 2007: Amendments and Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972.

Constitution experts, lawyers, teachers, women's rights activists, journalists and NGO leaders participated in the dialogue at Brac Centre in the capital as a participatory process to drafting a law towards free and fair election.

Dr Shaheen Malik presented the keynote paper on the topic, prepared with the help of Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), Brotee, Centre for Development Communication (CDC), Democracy Watch, Fair Election Monitoring Agency (Fema), Steps Towards Development, SUPRO Campaign for Good Governance, and Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB).

Prominent lawyer Dr Kamal Hossain observed that the present chief of the election commission (CEC) could be removed as there are several instances of such removal in the past.

He cited the examples of Justice Sultan Hossain Khan and Justice AKM Sadeque, who had been obliged to leave the office after losing confidence of the people.

Dr Kamal Hossain said that the CEC is holding a constitutional office for discharging constitutional responsibilities. He should not be allowed to hover over the nation like the ghost of Sindbad, he added.

Dr Kamal recalled that former finance minister M Saifur Rahman had rejected a proposal of the present CEC for releasing funds on grounds of misuse. He referred to a similar case in Thailand where election commissioners are serving jail terms for gross anomalies.

Former chief election commissioner Justice MA Rouf emphasised on monitoring casting of votes and the system of counting votes saying that these two things are vital for ensuring transparency in an election.

For ensuring authenticity of election results, a system of double counting should be introduced, he said.

He also suggested increasing the number of polling booths and setting up of each polling centre for no more than 1000 to 1500 voters. He said the police and returning officers are usually responsible for election rigging. If the number of polling booths increases, casting of votes will be before sunset reducing the opportunity for election manipulation, he added.

"Let the people including women and minorities come to polling centres and cast their votes freely without any fear and many things will come under control." On the other hand the system of vote counting must be updated so that no body can manipulate the results, he said.

Justice Rouf also observed that scrawling of graffiti on walls, as part of election campaigns, should be restricted.

He said some people compete in elections as "dummy candidates" and some become polling agents to manipulate the polls in favour of corrupt candidates. Polling booths should be set up near residential areas to encourage more participation of women voters in the election, he added.

Rouf said the existing ceiling on election expenditure for each candidate should be increased in line with the price hike of essentials.

Former adviser to a caretaker government M Hafizuddin Khan said the Election Commission must be authorised to put on trial the officials who will be accused of election rigging.

He observed that government officials often get relief from election related allegations when they go back to their original duties.

Barrister Rafiq UI Huq observed that removing the present CEC will be very difficult as he is adamant not to resign but he may be made ineffective through a presidential directive to go on a leave for three months in public interest.

He suggested implementation of several directives of the High Court Division regarding election related issues. Huq said statements of life style should be incorporated in income tax returns of candidates.

Former foreign minister Anisul Islam Mahmud suggested formation of a parliamentary committee for appointing chief election commissioners and other members of the Election Commission.

Since assumption of office on last Sunday night, the chief adviser has taken a number of measures aimed at reorganising the jobs of top admin officials.

So far the caretaker government has cancelled contractual appointment of nine secretaries, transferred 18 secretaries, six divisional commissioners, all divisional police commissioners including inspector general of police and Dhaka Metropolitan Police commissioner.

Some officials with reported leanings towards BNP and Jamaat were given charges of different vital positions in Monday night's first reshuffle. Those officials had got quick and sometimes undue promotions during the immediate past four-party alliance regime on political considerations.

The redistribution of jobs at the police administration on Thursday night shows that the officials who had allegedly been in the good book of the last regime have got even better postings.

Except the BNP-led four-party alliance, the other political parties and professional bodies described the reshuffling measures as mere eye-wash while the experts suggested massive reshuffle in the administration to ensure a level playing field in the build-up to the next election.

He also suggested some long term and short term measures for improving the current electoral process.

On the question of election campaign, Mahmud observed that one candidate should not organise more than two campaign rallies, and erection of campaign gates and setting up of campaign camps should be banned. He supported proportionate representation of women in the national election.

Mahmud also suggested registration of political parties and government budgetary allocation for election campaigns in order to keep campaign spending under control.

Barrister Tania Amir observed that many things are mentioned in the constitution and in election rules but those are not reflected in reality. People who are involved in grabbing government assets and harnessing different improper benefits should be disqualified as candidates, she said.

Nushrat Amin of Dhaka University stressed the need for an independent election commission. She said the media should carry campaign messages of candidates so that the messages reach more women helping them to make informed voting decisions and encouraging them to participate in greater number in the electoral process.

Omit Das Gupta underscored the need for commitment by political parties that they will not exercise communal politics. Supporting the suggestion of forming vigilance teams, Gupta said parliament membership of an elected lawmaker should be suspended if there is an allegation of attack on any minority community under his or her leadership.

Editor of The Daily Star Mahfuz Anam demanded reforms in the system of election tribunals as there is hardly any redress from judgement of these tribunals. He observed that most of the people are not aware of the roles of returning officers in ensuring transparent and accountable elections.

Barrister Amir-UI Islam wondered whether the Supreme Court itself had been involved in election engineering as it often issued stay orders against many writs regarding electoral disputes.

He suggested that the list of voters of each polling booth should be publicly disclosed so that the chance of tampering with the voter list can be reduced. Amir observed that resolving election disputes should not take long time. He said High Court verdicts should be final in settling election disputes instead of keeping the cases pending at the Appellate Division.

Former president of Supreme Court Bar Association Mahbubey Alam suggested formation of vigilance teams in every constituency during the election for monitoring the safety of the minority communities.

He observed that eligible voters who were not included in the voter list should be allowed to cast vote showing their identity cards issued by local authorities. An election should be suspended immediately after reports of violence, he added.

Dr Tofail Ahmed demanded a complete ban on involving under aged persons in election campaigns or in any election related activity. He observed that the young generation learns corruption through getting involved in election campaigns.

Ahmed said the voter list could be updated through incorporating local politicians and members of the civil society in the updating process.

Barrister Harunur Rashid said there must be several 'election disqualification commissions' for looking into electoral disputes.

Amanullah Khan stressed the need for strengthening the magistracy for curbing the influence of money and muscle in manipulation of elections.

Subrata Chowdhury, Rokeya Kabir, Advocate Salma Ali, and Monira Rahman also participated in the discussion.

**CG to form**  
**FROM PAGE 1** could not take such steps at its inaugural meeting on last Wednesday.

Sources said some advisers at yesterday's meeting observed that so far the measures taken to ready the administration for holding a free and fair election have been haphazard.

In absence of such committees, the advisers except the chief adviser who is in charge of most of the major portfolios relating to the conduct of election, cannot monitor the functions properly.

On instructions of the advisers' council, the cabinet division is working towards formation of the planned committees.

Since assumption of office on last Sunday night, the chief adviser has taken a number of measures aimed at reorganising the jobs of top admin officials.

So far the caretaker government has cancelled contractual appointment of nine secretaries, transferred 18 secretaries, six divisional commissioners, all divisional police commissioners including inspector general of police and Dhaka Metropolitan Police commissioner.

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## Manpower market shrunk

**FROM PAGE 1** offered a substantial quota of hiring workers from Bangladesh. Italy wanted Bangladesh sign a readmission agreement, which is simply consenting to deport the irregular jobseekers in the country.

This would not have affected Bangladesh at all, as almost all the Bangladeshis who previously entered Italy irregularly were pardoned under amnesties and issued work permits. Italy wanted to welcome regular migrants and discourage irregular ones, as they need workers too.

Surprisingly, the issue became a puzzle to the ministry. After sitting on the proposal for a long time, officials asked the foreign and a few other ministries for opinion.

But the foreign ministry tragically torpedoed the proposal on grounds that if Italy starts deporting "illegal" Bangladeshis, there would be severe political fallout.

"This was a great opportunity for Bangladesh, as Italy pays much higher salary compared to that of the Middle Eastern countries," said a recruiting agent.

Businesses also suggested that other countries of the European Union would also follow Italy's example and Bangladesh signed the agreement. If signed, it could have opened a new horizon for Bangladesh in overseas employment.

The foreign ministry is supposed to cooperate with the expatriates' ministry in opening new markets, but no sign of it has ever been observed.

The expatriates' ministry wrote to the foreign office to ask the US mission in Dhaka for help in opening CGFNS (a globally conducted test by the US to determine nurses' proficiency level) examination centre in Bangladesh.

But the issue is still in the deep freeze. Neither the foreign nor the expatriates' ministry put it forward. A certain grade in the test is required for employment of foreign nurses in the US. The nearest such centre is in Pune in India, which is financially and logistically not affordable for most Bangladeshis nurses.

Manpower businesses said had there been such a centre here, a good number of Bangladeshis nurses could have got jobs in the US.

A dearth of funds and knowledgeable officials in the expatriates' ministry is also a major deterrent to exploring new markets.

For instance, Sudan is a potential market for foreign workers as it gets huge investments by foreign companies. Some of those companies expressed interest in hiring workers from Bangladesh. But there is no Bangladesh mission in the region except in Cairo, which showed no interest in this regard.

Migration experts observe the subordinate mindset of the expatriates' ministry and its utter incompetence are also partly responsible for such failure.

**DECLINE IN TRADITIONAL MARKETS**  
 Overseas employment in the traditional markets, mainly in the Middle Eastern countries, took a sharp decline because of high migration cost.

A worker now pays Tk 2 lakh to Tk 2.3 lakh for a job of a cleaner in Saudi Arabia at a salary of 350 riyal (Tk 5,600), whereas the cost was Tk 1.4 lakh to Tk 1.7 lakh only a year ago.

However, emphasis on employment of local youths by the importing countries also contributed to the decline.

According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), the KSA alone employed almost 72.48 percent of total manpower exported from Bangladesh in 2002.

The number came down to 35.60 percent during January to September last year. The decline pushed down overall overseas employment to 15.45 percent in 2005 compared to that of 2004.

About 25 lakh of over 40 lakh Bangladeshis expatriates work in the ME countries and among them about 16 lakh are in the KSA.

Absence of a bilateral agreement with Oman are also thwarting huge opportunities of employing

Bangladeshi workers. Oman had about 2.5 lakh Bangladeshis workers just two decades ago which, instead of increasing, has come down to 1.1 lakh now. The country, which is third in the ME in terms of sending remittance, could hire at least 50,000 workers if there were a bilateral agreement, Bangladesh Ambassador to Oman Golam Akbar said recently.

With much hype, Bangladesh signed a cooperation agreement with Qatar. The government allowed enhancement of flight frequencies of Qatar Airways upon verbal understanding that they would never take massive manpower from Bangladesh.

Though the flight numbers have been increased, Bangladesh is yet to realise its portion of the bargain.

Another ME country, Lebanon, has demand for Bangladeshis workers, but it is not much fruitful either as there is no Bangladesh mission in Beirut.

A new opportunity has been created for construction workers in the wake of the recent Israeli attacks on Lebanon. But neither of the foreign or expatriates' ministries took any initiatives to this effect.

**FAILURE TO CONTROL RECRUITING AGENCIES**  
 The ministry's efforts to control migration cost never had a chance due mainly to big agents spearheaded by lawmakers close to Hawa Bhaban.

Flaunting rules, they always got away scot-free with less than minimum salaries and highest possible migration cost. The cases of Malaysia and Korea are the best examples of how the ministry totally failed to regulate recruiting agencies.

**MALAYSIA**  
 In the last few years Malaysia banned hiring manpower from Bangladesh several times on allegation that recruiting agencies here overcharge and even create an unholly competition in securing job demand letters.

The agencies are also accused of sending more workers than the number of original visas issued.

Late in July this year, Malaysia lifted the last ban imposed, allowed Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (Baira) to manage the total migration process and installed a computerised network to prevent forgery.

Malaysia also gave Baira an option to design a distribution system of job demand letters of Malaysian companies. But controversies arose in the trade body itself.

A section of agencies said the demand letters should equally be distributed among all the Baira members so that the unholly competition could be averted.

But a number of influential agencies, including those owned by both BNP and Awami League lawmakers, said this would depend on the agencies' capacity to secure the letters.

Over 100 agencies, which had close links with Malaysian agents, supported this view, while most others were unaware of the real context of the proposed system.

Eventually, the latter made 'successful' attempts to clinch their goal, resulting in a severe competition in securing job demand letters.

These agencies started crowding Malaysia and some of them allegedly made a syndicate and began persuading Malaysian employers. This seriously annoyed the Malaysian government and actually invited another partial ban on manpower hiring on October 4.

Some Baira members filed complaints with the government that the agencies are charging each worker Tk 1.5 lakh to Tk 2 lakh, whereas Bangladesh and Malaysia bilaterally fixed the rate at \$1,200 or Tk 84,000.

They alleged the Baira was charging the extra money on the plea of paying fees to Malaysian lobbyists. But satisfying some Bangladeshis ministers, who also demanded a share of the extra sum, was another reason.

On October 22, the expatriates' ministry asked the commerce ministry to suspend Baira executive committee. The Baira was

overcharging the workers and Baira President MAH Salim rented an office in Kuala Lumpur without the government permission, the ministry reasoned.

It also sought permission from the Prime Minister's Office to form a committee to investigate the matter. The committee is scheduled to give its reports in 30 days.

There are allegations former state minister for the expatriates' ministry Maj (ret'd) Quamrul Islam, who maintains close links with Hawa Bhaban, allowed recruiting agents to send workers to Malaysia last year receiving a bribe of Tk 15,000 per worker.

At that time Malaysia allowed Bangladesh to send about 8,000 workers, who had been deported under the general amnesty. Taking the advantage of bribing, many agents substituted original workers by new ones keeping other particulars intact.

The news quickly travelled to the Malaysian authorities who showed little interest to deal with the manpower issue at government level.

Consequently, the recent arrangement has been done with private sector business body, the Baira. Malaysia hardly bothered to discuss their decision with the government. The country even did not respond to a formal request of the expatriates' ministry for hiring 30 percent of the total workers through the government-owned recruiting agency BOESL.

**SOUTH KOREA**  
 Similarly, South Korea, another lucrative job market for Bangladeshis workers, also identified high migration cost as the root cause for switching jobs and illegal overstaying of workers.

Bangladeshi workers in Korea violate contracts by switching jobs or by migrating to Japan for higher salary because they are desperate to earn more to recover the huge amount they pay the recruiting agencies at home.

The ministry failed to reduce the migration cost to Korea that shot up to Tk 8 lakh to Tk 10 lakh. Over the five years it had no control over four recruiting agencies -- Silver Line Associate of BNP lawmaker MAH Salim, Unique Eastern (Pvt) Ltd of AL MP Noor Ali, Rupsha Overseas Ltd of BNP MP Ali Asgar Lobby, and Orbital Enterprise of former AL MP Mostafa Kamal.

Except a few hundreds, Korea banned Bangladeshis workers by a resolution in its parliament through the cartel of the four agents.

Under the Employment Permit System (EPS), Korea is hiring workers from South and Southeast Asian countries without any restrictions. Bangladesh was deprived of it only because the government failed to control the cartel of the four agencies.

**WAGE EARNERS' WELFARE FUND**  
 Wage Earners' Welfare Fund created by mandatory contributions from out-bound expatriates and supposedly to create welfare provisions for them, is a mystery. Its accumulated amount was never made public and the media has no access to any of its information.

Supported by an average collection of Tk 10 lakh every day, this swelling fund is reportedly clocking around Tk 300 crore. It takes only a few welfare measures like death compensation, housing facilities and construction of one-stop service centres to provide short stay and other facilities for aspirant migrants.

The sheer volume of the fund is a problem in itself and alluring ingenious ways and means by its custodians to expend.

One such outlet is frequent multi-country global trips by MPs of the parliamentary standing committees, ministry and BMET officials and even Baira office-bearers in the pretext of business exploration and status survey of the expatriates.

**OVERSEAS EMPLOYMENT POLICY**  
 After years of exercise, inter-ministerial meetings and dialogues with private sector, NGOs and international organisations, the cabinet approved Bangladesh Overseas Employment Policy.

But it is yet to be passed in parliament. Experts said most

other ministries deleted the clauses that defined their responsibilities in promotion of overseas manpower employment. But the draft policy was quite comprehensive, as it was prepared after thorough consultations with other countries' policies.

**FEMALE MIGRATION**  
 In December 2002, the government partially liberalised the female migration to all ME countries on individual application basis. It was previously limited only to Saudi Arabia.

At a later stage, the Baira was given the responsibility to arrange pre-departure trainings and run the management at destination countries in cooperation with the Bangladesh missions, which the body totally failed to comply with.

In a scenario where 48 percent of the global migrants are female, Bangladesh is yet to exceed one percent mark. About 80 percent of the Indonesian, 75 percent of Sri Lanka and 90 percent of the Philippine migrants are female.

Policy inadequacy is depriving Bangladesh of so many opportunities. Besides, such a negative stance is pushing female jobseekers to bribe their exit and putting them into more vulnerable position.

Apathy and negative signals from our mission officials are stalling the ministry from taking a comprehensive policy and monitoring programme.

**CONCEPT PAPER**  
 The expatriates' welfare ministry took an initiative to prepare a comprehensive report on availability and potentiality of manpower in the country and formulate a strategy to negotiate with foreign countries in this regard.

The ministry formed a committee in December 2004 for negotiations and facilitation for liberalising temporary movement of natural persons under Mode-4 of GATS of the WTO.

A proposal for funding the study was forwarded to the Ministry of Commerce, but the exercise is in limbo since then.

Such negligence is stifling the country's most potential sector, which is contributing \$5 billion-remittance every year despite unlimited obstacles.

**DATABANK**  
 Creation of a databank at the BMET was a good initiative for storing data of the aspirant migrants, migrant workers and those returned from abroad.

But arrangement with the home ministry is still pending to use the database for online immigration system of entry and departure.

**WELFARE DESK**  
 The ministry has established two welfare desks at Zia International Airport for facilitating safe arrival and departure. But there are allegations that desk workers in connivance with corrupt immigration officials extort many aspirant migrants and help irregular migrants.

Probashi Channel, a bus service for returnee expatriates, is a laudable initiative for smooth departure and arrival, but it is not regular in operation.

**Oli asks**  
**FROM PAGE 16** Oli was addressing a joining ceremony at the party's Baridhara office in the capital. A number of leaders and workers from Jatiya Party (Ershad) of Gazipur and former honorary captain from Brahmanbaria Abdul Haque joined the newly formed party.

He said more "honest" people from BNP would join the LDP by the next month. He bitterly criticised the immediate past government for its involvement in unabated corruption.

LDP leaders Maj (ret'd) Abdul Mannan, Sheikh Razzak Ali, Anwarul Kabir Talukder, Alamgir Kabir, Redwan Ahmed and Firoz M Hasan also spoke on the occasion.

**4-party**  
**FROM PAGE 1** Commission is preparing to announce the schedule of the next general election. In this situation, we will ask the caretaker government chief not to move for any change here in the face of pressure from any quarter."

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia chaired the meeting that began around 4:30pm and continued for about one and a half hours.

The meeting reiterated the four-party alliance's demand for steps against caretaker government advisers Sultana Kamal and CM Shafi Sami "as they violated their oath and neutrality by meeting Sheikh Hasina secretly and avoiding the national flag on their vehicle", Mujahid said.

He was briefing the reporters on the meeting as BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan left the place without saying anything.

Mujahid said the meeting opposed indiscriminate reshuffling in the administration, which, it observed, is creating "uncertainty".

"We will request the caretaker government to rather steer the country towards the election," he said, adding, "The caretaker government has two functions—carrying out routine work and assisting the Election Commission in holding free and fair election in a peaceful atmosphere."

There is a congenial environment for election now. The four-party alliance, along with people, will resist any move to foil this environment," Mujahid said.

BNP standing committee members Dr Khandaker Mosharrar Hossain, M Shamsul Islam and KM Obaid, Bangladesh Jatiya Party (BJP) Chairman Nazim Rahman Monjur and Islami Okiya Jote (IOJ) leader Mufi Fazlul Haque Amni, among others, were present at the meeting.

## State media

Executive Producer (news) Nurul Azam Paban and News Producer Main Uddin, who are also in control of news flow from the BTV's bulletins, are widely known as beneficiaries of the immediate past government.

At the very end of the four-party government's tenure, it gave senior officials of BTV, M Hamid and Abu Taher, forced retirement so that they cannot get important positions during the caretaker government period.

In the state-run radio -- Bangladesh Betar -- Apel Mahmud, deputy director general, (programme) is also incumbent vice-president of Jatiyatibadi Samajik Sangkritik Sangstha, cultural wing of BNP. He received contractual appointment twice in the current post during the previous regime.

Nasimul Quader Chowdhury, deputy director general (news) of Bangladesh Betar, is also a politically biased officer and he was promoted twice, in the special quota of the president, during the four-party regime.

Surprisingly enough, Mokhesur Rahman Chowdhury, press secretary to the president, who was a senior journalist of BNP mouthpiece the Dainik Dinkal, is still in his post. Senior Joint Secretary General of BNP Tanque Rahman is the publisher of Dinkal.

Sources said the four-party government, just a few days before completing its term, made Abdul Hye Siddique the director general of PIB. Hye, a pro-BNP journalist, has been trying to get four-party ticket for the next general elections. Despite his overt political activities, he has not yet been axed.

Meanwhile, BNP appointed PIO, a vital post under the information ministry, M Muhaddes is still in service.

Besides, Zahurul Haque, director general of external affairs division, is going on with his contractual job. Known as a staunch BNP supporter among the journalist community, he was made DG at the very beginning of the four-party alliance rule.

**AL man beaten**  
**FROM PAGE 16** wounded and unconscious Tajul to the local office of Zia Sangsad, tied him up and confined him there, local sources said.

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Deputy press secretaries Helal Uddin Ahmed, Sarwar Alam and Murad Kamal are still in their posts at the PMO (Chief Adviser's Office) and were allegedly appointed under political considerations.

**N Korea**  
**FROM PAGE 16** considering