

Voter list

Flawed list means flawed results

WE find the Election Commission's (EC) remarks that the current voter list cannot be rectified due to lack of time totally unacceptable.

What does it want the people to make of the comments? That we should go to the polls with a flawed voter list? Does the EC fail to comprehend the gravity of the issue? Voting on the basis of a defective voter list will mean a flawed election and even more, flawed results because of the possibility of casting of false votes. Is it what the nation had entrusted the EC to do, conduct an exercise that would mean wastage of time, money and effort at national level and more hassle for the voters? This the country can ill afford.

We had through this column several times in the past demanded that the voter list be made foolproof and that nobody should make light of such an important matter. The inaction of the EC and its total disregard of very genuine demands of the public reinforce the apprehension that there may be ulterior motives in seeing that the voter list remains the way it is.

We find in the EC comments an acknowledgement of the fact that the voter list is indeed flawed. And if it's the time constraint that it chooses to proffer as an excuse now for not undertaking the correction process it must tell the nation what it had been doing all this time when the list was finalised and waiting for final publication, almost six months back? Why did it choose to sit on it for six months, only to wake up now and find that there is no time for redaction of the voter list? The fact that a voter list was made having inherent flaws with ill motives borders on gross neglect of duty and should be ground enough for the president to take cognisance of and initiate appropriate action against the CEC.

One of the most important prerequisites of a transparent and fair election is a voter list that is perfect in every sense, acceptable to all. Time cannot be an excuse for allowing wrongs to be sanctified. Mistakes must be corrected even if it means working overtime seven days a week before the election schedule is announced. Without that the very spirit of a democratic exercise will be lost.

Tax amnesty and money whitening

Keep polls free from influence of black money

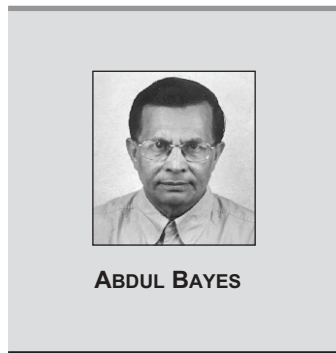
THE Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), an independent think tank, has recommended that the caretaker government take certain steps with a view to making the electoral process more transparent and lessening the clout of black money. More specifically, the CPD's suggestion is that the government instruct the National Board of Revenue (NBR) to disclose the names of the candidates in the next elections who got the opportunity to whiten their black money, taking advantage of the recent tax amnesty offered by the immediate past government. The government had set certain conditions for the black money holders to legitimize their undisclosed earnings, but the fact remains that a huge amount of black money has been whitened and also that many of the candidates in the next polls might be benefited from the government offer.

The candidates must declare how much money they have whitened and their statements have to be verified by the NBR. They should do so voluntarily and in case of any failure in this respect they have to be certified by the NBR before they can get through the process of seeking election. This is going to be a crucially important exercise if we want the election to be fair. One of the gravest charges brought against a section of MPs elected to the last parliament is that they used black money to influence the election results.

So there is no doubt that the malady has been diagnosed correctly. It has a lot to do with fighting corruption in the government, which has bruised the country's image badly. The problem is that those spending their ill-gotten money in violation of rules and regulations usually try to recover it through indulging in corruption after being elected. Thus the sin is committed by those who are supposed to eliminate it. Hence, the government has to take a firm stand on the issue.

Another important point is that the voters have every right to know who they are going to elect. Finally, it can no longer be allowed that people's representatives will amass ill-gotten money and use the same for winning elections once again! You cannot have it both ways.

Some advice for the advisers



ABDUL BAYES

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Unfortunately, the programs of BTV seem to follow the suit of the earlier government. The partisan employees should immediately be withdrawn from their duties, before people march in the streets against the ill-doings of BTV. The fact that Mannan Bhuiyan's press conference against two advisers got priority over the Paltan speech of the leader of the 14-party alliance is a clear indication of the alignment of the BTV officials.

THE learned advisers to the caretaker government (CG) are, reportedly, of the view that they would seek advice from different sources for smooth functioning of their short-lived government. Seeking suggestions from here and there, especially from political parties, is not a new phenomenon.

Shafi Sami and Sultana Kamal fell prey to the mischievous media propaganda of BNP, even though the two advisers had permission from the CG Chief to visit Sheikh Hasina's house. We are also surprised to note that eminent politicians like Mannan Bhuiyan and Moudud Ahmed provided the statement, which turned out to be wrong, that adviser Sultana Kamal belonged to a political party.

But suppose, for the sake of fairness, that the allegation was right. Is it unconstitutional to be a member of the CG with a political tag? If that is so, how come KM Hasan was named to take over as

CG chief by the outgoing government? Anyway, although I am an ordinary citizen of the country, I take the "unwanted" privilege of providing our learned advisers with some advice.

Overhauling EC

Perhaps the overhauling of the EC, and removal of beneficiary officials from the administration, is universal advice from home and abroad. The sooner it is done the better it will be for the nation. The constitution is for the people, and not for a person, at least not for someone who seems to have been bashed by the High Court for playing foul with the voter list.

Entertaining ETV

Ekushey Television (ETV) was the pioneering private TV channel in Bangladesh. The very name reminds us of the great language movement that paved the way towards freedom. As far as I can recollect, a group of dedicated media men managed the station. Happily, the channel soon

secured a place in the hearts of the millions of viewers with its neutral news, views and programs linked to our long history and heritage. But unfortunately the anti-liberation forces took advantage of some legal loopholes to cause its premature exit from the world of private channels. The outgoing government even expelled one of the pioneering personalities from the country just because of his involvement with ETV.

I learnt that ETV got over the legal barriers during the last regime. But the then government used its arsenal of instruments to see that ETV did not function. SA Mahmud, the torch-bearer of the channel, died of heart attack, possibly hastened because he failed to see his dream come true. Meantime, the previous government opened the gate for a few more private channels, and all of them are owned and managed by the ministers and MPs of the erstwhile government. While we

have no questions about their entry into the domain of electronic media -- excepting of course the sources of funds fueling such projects -- we want to know why ETV should not be allowed to have its due place in the world of electronic media.

The CG, headed by Professor Iajuddin Ahmed, claims to be a neutral government. We expect that the current CG would immediately allow ETV to operate like other TV channels, and thus maintain a balance among the private TV channels. In fact, one of the indicators of its neutrality could be its willingness to do justice to ETV. We, therefore, take the privilege of advising our learned advisers, including the chief adviser of the caretaker government, to remove the administrative barriers standing in the way of its operation. We understand that the previous government, with strong political motives, erected some barriers so that ETV could not enter into the

market. But for ensuring a level playing field the barriers should be demolished. The millions of the countrymen might appreciate their steps in this regard.

Stop all appointments

Another advice from our side relates to appointments in various institutions and government organizations. We shall focus on public universities. At present, say for example, Jahangirnagar University administration is on a spree, recruiting teachers and officers. Most of these recruitments are not being made following the required principles. For example, it appears that the authorities advertised various posts -- totaling 50 or so -- on October 19, the day the university was closed for Eid vacation. The last date for submission of applications was November 5. In between, 10 working days were lost following Eid and the programs of the opposition parties. More so, the new departments for which recruitments are being made do not have the permission from the UGC (a requirement for the universities) and therefore, are likely to face financial problems. And finally, since the country is now running under a caretaker government, all appointments and promotions should be postponed immediately (from the date the CG assumed power). Failure to do that might imply that the current, politically appointed,

administrations of the public universities are using the neutral image of the CG for their personal benefit.

Biased BTV

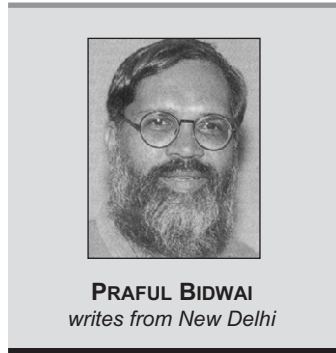
Unfortunately, the programs of BTV seem to follow the suit of the earlier government. The partisan employees should immediately be withdrawn from their duties, before people march in the streets against the ill-doings of BTV. The fact that Mannan Bhuiyan's press conference against two advisers got priority over the Paltan speech of the leader of the 14-party alliance is a clear indication of the alignment of the BTV officials.

Ensure neutrality everywhere

And finally, as has been revealed by various media reports and comments, the Honourable President has to prove that, despite his past political links, he is now neutral as far as operation of the CG is concerned. We are, till now, happy with the advisers, excepting the childish remarks of one adviser which sounded like support for a particular political party. However, the ball is now in the advisers' court, and they will choose whether their names are written in history through holding a free and fair election, or else are consigned to the dust bin of history for an unfair deal in this regard.

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The Left's tightrope walk

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

The Left parties have not grown more rapidly in the Hindi belt despite agrarian distress, unemployment and frustration among the youth because they're seen as belonging to a bygone era of statism. To correct this image, the Left must convey its relevance in contemporary terms -- as a force immersed in democratic culture, with one of the longest international histories of working a parliamentary system. The Left must develop innovative solutions to today's problems by putting flesh-and-blood people before capital. It must formulate alternatives in health, education, housing, water, electricity, and in macroeconomic policy.

COMMUNIST Party of India (Marxist) general secretary Prakash Karat has called for a re-appraisal of the UPA's foreign and security policies in the light of the National Common Minimum Program, which promised "an independent foreign policy and [global] multipolarity."

Such reappraisal should be extended to the UPA's economic and social policies too. These deviate from the promised egalitarian development and re-assertion of secularism. The UPA won the 2004 elections because the public was disgusted with the Bharatiya Janata Party's communally divisive politics -- revealed in the Gujarat carnage. The electorate also felt insulted at the ludicrous "India Shining" campaign.

But the UPA hasn't implemented its mandate. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh hasn't even once reiterated his commitment to secure justice for the Gujarat victims by bringing the culprits to book.

Barring the National Rural Employment Guarantee and Right to Information Acts, the UPA hasn't imparted substance to its social promises. Its overall economic policy isn't sharply distinguishable from the BJP's.

In place of the promised foreign policy course correction, the UPA has tailed the United States on Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and North Korea, and continued the BJP's pro-Zionist policies. Worse, it has embraced the US-preferred Islamophobic model of terrorism. This highlights the Left's dilemma. The Left has acquired unprecedented relevance, with its highest-ever figure of 61 MPs. It's acknowledged as the UPA's "conscience-keeper."

Yet, its well-considered pleas on food security, labour laws, rehabilitation, tribal rights, and urban planning, and the rights to education and healthcare are all ignored.

However, the Left cannot withdraw support to the UPA and risk the BJP's return. It must perform a tightrope walk and engage the UPA through dia-

logue, lobbying, and protests. This is a difficult exercise in itself. It also means subordinating the Left's core concerns and organisational priorities to the task of keeping the BJP out of power.

The CPI and CPI(M) have done well to undertake "serious introspection" on their own functioning to preserve their distinctive identity.

The Left, despite flaws, plays a uniquely worthy and irreplaceable role in India -- as the voice of the underprivileged, as a force for the extension of freedoms, and as a repository of progressive ideas. If the Left didn't exist, we'd have to invent it!

Three questions demand the Left's serious attention. Is it setting an example of good governance in West Bengal and Kerala? How can it achieve its major objective of building a base in the Hindi belt? And what's its strategy for expanding its political reach, while inducting new cadres?

The first question warrants candid answers. In West Bengal, the Left is drifting Rightwards. It has revived the state's long-

stagnant economy through private investment -- but at the expense of its own integrity.

As Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee said during his Pramod Dasgupta Memorial Lecture in July, he's following a "capitalist model."

This model is based upon accumulation through dispossession and impoverishment, including "cleansing" cities of slum-dwellers, and creating special economic zones through dilution of labour laws. Tata Motors' Singur project has become controversial even within the Left Front.

The Left's base in Bengal is shifting. An April 2006 poll showed a five percent adverse swing among the poor, and a 17 to 18 percent gain among the rich.

In Kerala, the Left has recovered its base among the poor and religious minorities. The Kerala problem is essentially internal to the CPI(M): a rift between the VS Achuthanandan and Pinarayi Vijayan factions. This has undermined party cohesion as never before.

Mr Achuthanandan's elevation

as CM has left his rivals fuming -- and plotting. The factionalism extends to governmental decision-making too. A proposal made by a minister belonging to one group is shot down by the other.

Take the Hindi belt. The CPI was once formidably strong in Bihar and central and eastern Uttar Pradesh. But it suffered massive haemorrhage in Bihar. Its UP unit was swallowed by the Samajwadi Party. The CPI is slowly rebuilding these bases.

The CPI(M) has had no major Hindi-speaking base, but is seeking small gains through temporary alliances with leaders like Messrs Mulayam Singh Yadav, Laloo Prasad, and Ram Bilas Paswan. This is bringing it into a clash with the CPI, especially in UP.

But the two parties shouldn't drift apart -- they should be merging. Their programmatic differences are no longer relevant. They share each other's doctrine and practice.

Resolving differences over alliances with the centrist parties is a pre-condition for the Left's growth in the Hindi belt, where caste politics has hardened. The Left cannot possibly relate to caste like other parties, without abandoning its class-oriented approach.

The Left must also develop a credible strategy of self-rejuvenation. The CPI(M) has 9.5 lakh members and the CPI nearly 6 lakhs. Their membership has grown by 8 to 10 percent over two years.

This is impressive when seen against the decline of most Communist parties the world over after the Soviet Union's collapse. But it also hides the non-renewal of membership.

After stagnation between the late 1990s, the CPI has expanded in Kerala and Bengal. But its membership non-renewal rate is 18 percent. The CPI(M) is doing particularly well in Andhra (35 percent growth since 2005), and elsewhere. But it too suffers from non-renewal, especially in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

The Left parties have not grown more rapidly in the Hindi belt despite agrarian distress, unemployment and frustration among the youth because they're seen as belonging to a bygone era of statism.

To correct this image, the Left must convey its relevance in contemporary terms -- as a force immersed in democratic culture, with one of the longest international histories of working a parliamentary system.

The Left must develop innovative solutions to today's problems by putting flesh-and-blood people before capital. It must formulate alternatives in health, education, housing, water, electricity, and in macroeconomic policy.

Only thus can it attract underprivileged youth and public-spirited students. This is no less a priority than parliamentary politics.

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On prize, pride and prejudice

One hopes that the limits of micro-credit, along with its possibilities, in ridding the country of poverty -- to consign poverty to the museum, in Professor Yunus's hyperbole -- will be recognized before we are all swept off our feet by the wind of euphoria that the prize has generated. Fast economic growth remains the most important way to reduce poverty, and far more than micro-credit will be needed to achieve it. No messianic vision can take its place.

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

A surge of euphoria swept the country on October 13. Professor Muhammad Yunus and his Grameen Bank had been awarded the 2006 Nobel Prize for Peace. The announcement from Oslo was greeted with huge jubiliations throughout the country. People danced in the street, mobbed the laureate's house, hugged him, raised full-throated slogans for him, prayed for him, and held an almost impromptu public reception attended by broadly smiling dignitaries from around the country, with promises of many more receptions to come.

The Nobel laureate himself was jubilant, and rightly so. Newspapers reported that he never ceased to smile during the

entire length of the public reception. He was all smiles since then. I too was truly proud that a fellow Bengali had been awarded the prize. I rejoiced. Nevertheless, an unabashedly two-handed economist that I am, I instinctively looked at what lay on the other hand. Public pronouncements from Professor Yunus, as well as the flood of writings on the award in the newspapers only sharpened that instinct.

For a starter, I soon recalled that it was not entirely unusual for a Nobel laureate to say a word or two in praise of some of the other deserving candidates for the prize around the globe who had worked for peace on earth. A certain expression of humility on his part would have been noble. Given the contentious nature of the Peace Prize nowadays, and the dubious superiority of peace

through poverty alleviation over peace achieved by other more direct means, such humility would also not have been out of place. I recalled too that quite a few other organizations in the country have been fighting poverty for years.

What was not said is of course less important than what was. And there was a plenty of the latter. First, it was said by the maestro himself that as a country we had, on October 13, reached a highway of such elevation that we would never again come down from it.

The Bangladesh of October 13 was not the same as the Bangladesh of the day before, we were told. He sounded oracular. His words echoed from a thousand mouths. All of this was exhilarating enough. But was it really meaningful? Euphoria can be dangerous stuff. We should

know. We as a nation were on a glorious highway after our liberation in 1971 -- a far greater feat than an individual's winning a Nobel Prize -- and it did not take us take long to exit into a morass.

Euphoria can easily border on the psychedelic. Overwhelmed by euphoria, some serious people have made pronouncements that struck me as rather odd. A dear friend of mine, a learned commentator, evoked Adam Smith while praising micro-enterprises supported by micro-credit. He seemed to think that economic activities supported by Grameen Bank financing involved division of labour a la Adam Smith which came to be considered as an important source of productivity growth and a major pillar of a modern economy.

In fact, possibilities of division of labour, as seen by the founder of modern economics, and envisaged mainly in manufacturing processes, are rather limited in very small family enterprises such as the ones financed by micro-credit (unless of course, for example, a way can be devised whereby one set of people raises a part of a goat or chicken and

another set of people raises another part and so on, and the parts are then assembled into a final goat or a chicken!) Micro-credit does not necessarily induce greater division of labour and higher productivity.

A prominent economist of the country has declared, in the same breath of feel good and pride, that Professor Yunus was the pioneer in application of theories of economics. It is not entirely clear to me which theories he had in mind. But this brings to my mind some of Professor Yunus's own pronouncements on economics not so long ago.

Speaking at the annual gathering of the Bangladesh Economic Association in 1998, he castigated "text-book economics" as an "exclusive playground for blood-thirsty profit-seekers," denounced it as being "responsible for creating the world that we live in," and declared that the "seeds of poverty are planted firmly in the pages of economic text-books." These are words of mighty prejudice. It is rather difficult to see him pioneering the application of any theory whatsoever from the accursed science.

There is, though, one impor-

tant idea from textbook economics that lurks behind Professor Yunus's micro-financing. Economics tell us that the real rate of return on capital in poor, capital-scarce countries can be high, often considerably higher than in rich, capital-abundant countries. One might argue that the high rates of interest charged on loans offered by the Grameen Bank, and the reported ability of the borrowers to repay these loans, pretty much bear out this idea. But I do not suppose Professor Yunus, with his disdain of economics, would care much to dwell on this. And why should he fall back on an esoteric idea from economics that nobody understands in order to defend high interest rates that everybody does? In any case, to do so would only bring the alleged exorbitance of interests charged into sharper focus.

Professor Yunus rightly emphasizes the human aspect of the Grameen endeavour. Raising the self esteem of the poor by enabling them to take economic decisions on their own must be regarded as one of the noblest of causes. In the final analysis, however, it is all about

raising their level of income and alleviation of poverty. The number of borrowers of Grameen loans has been rising, so has been the average income level of the borrowers. Grameen's official figures put the number of borrowers at 6.7 million. Around 58 percent of the borrower families are also said to have climbed above the poverty. These are impressive numbers, though the latter figure is probably subject to a great deal of uncertainty, given the nature of the concept of poverty, and the absence of an independent estimate of success.

These numbers should however be put in perspective. The number of borrowers is still small in a nation of 150 million. More significant is the contribution of Grameen Bank and activities financed by the bank's loans. That contribution is still a tiny fraction of the total gross domestic product of the country. The bank's website (www.grameen-info.org) puts that contribution at 1.1 percent for 1996, some twenty years after the project was initiated by Professor Yunus. Figures for later years are not available on the website, one wonders why. A figure of much

beyond 1-2 per cent is probably unlikely for recent years. (I am willing to eat the humble pie if the conjecture turns out to be widely off the mark.)

The contribution of Grameen Bank to poverty alleviation in the country as a whole is thus still quite small. Adding the contributions of other non-government organizations like the Brac, which have gone unsung, in fighting poverty, one would arrive at a somewhat more respectable number of people who have crossed the poverty line. More respectable, and yet still small.

One hopes that the limits of micro-credit, along with its possibilities, in ridding the country of poverty -- to consign poverty to the museum, in Professor Yunus's hyperbole -- will be recognized before we are all swept off our feet by the wind of euphoria that the prize has generated. Fast economic growth remains the most important way to reduce poverty, and far more than micro-credit will be needed to achieve it. No messianic vision can take its place.

Mahfuzur Rahman is a former United Nations economist.