

What is at stake

There should not be any doubt that in case the just past ruling alliance can get away with their sinister design and become successful in having a manipulated result in their favour by not allowing the next general election to be free and fair, there would remain no chance of having a free and fair election in future. Criminals would continue to get prominence in politics and would eventually take over the society by elbowing out decent people. Citizens would lose their right to elect representatives of their choice and would also lose their power to ensure that the acts of their representatives really stand for the desire of at least a majority of people of the country.

GM QUADER

THE eighth parliament completed its term on the October 27. Subsequent to that, an interim caretaker government has been formed to conduct a general election with a view to elect a parliament and a new government within a period of ninety days. This time, unlike before, a series of serious controversies has come up, leading the country towards a political conflict and turmoil.

An election is considered free and fair when all citizens eligible to be voters can cast their choice without any influence of fear or favour and the counting of votes and results are declared on factual position as per laid down procedure. The first and the last portion of the said definition emphasizing "all eligible voters" and the declaration of results "on factual basis" by the authority have been included due to the reality in Bangladesh.

Recently, a big problem cropped up in preparation of the voters list and the matter went up to the highest court. A list prepared by the Election Commission (EC) subsequent to that was considered faulty as names of many eligible voters were alleged not included in the final record whereas many false names or ghost voters were listed.

In Bangladesh, there are instances that government officials are used to manipulate the vote count and declare result not on the basis of authenticity. In an environment of pervasive corruption as in Bangladesh administration officials working as returning officers, assistant returning officers, presiding officers, polling officers, and officials responsible for maintain-

ing law and order are prone to become partisan on receipt of bribe from participating candidate or the political party.

Basic issue to have free and fair election is to keep the voters free from undue favour and fear. There are election rules and laws of land to facilitate that. But in reality, due to lack of efficiency, honesty and willingness of existing bureaucracy responsible for conduct of election there is hardly any difficulty to be pass all the so called rules and laws unchallenged. This has made our election a game of black money and muscle, the more you have the better chance that you would come out successful. Free and fair election is possible as is some times seen only if all the contesting candidates are either unwilling or incapable in use of black money and muscle. Of course, no body should deny that free and fair election is becoming rarer with each election.

Owners of muscle and black money, that is criminals, are thus drawing favourable attention from the political parties to be included in the party fold. In the process, criminals are being continuously going up in the position of political power in greater numbers with passage of time. They are now fitted in different tiers of political parties, are filling up elected positions like members of parliament and are even becoming ministers of the elected government. In short, criminals are taking over the positions of leadership of the society. Corruption, lack of social justice and rule of law, disparity and absence of good governance are the natural consequences.

One of the important factors for election victory of the immediate past government of four-party alliance had been to give nomination in larger numbers to candidates with big money and criminal muscle power. They out-numbered their rivals in this respect and established superiority in raw power to influence the election with money and by intimidating the voters.

The above result of success has encouraged the four-party alliance government to further concentrate on promoting the criminals and criminology to flourish further to be used for their party interest specially with a view to win the next general election. All the above were done under the authority of state power legalized with the seal of election victory under a so-called democratic system.

From the first day the four-party alliance government took over office till the last day when they handed over the same to the caretaker, all the tasks were carried out giving priority to influence voters in the next general election. That is, from the first day in office till the last day all the efforts of the immediate past BNP led alliance government was to ensure that the next general election due for early 2007 is held un-free and un-fair.

On the first day, a big ministry was sworn in with 60 ministers and a total of about 100 having the rank and status of ministers. This number was unprecedented in the history of Bangladesh. The above was done at a time when the incumbent four-party alliance government claimed to have inherited from the immediate past government of Awami league a shattered and vulnerable econ-

omy. Logic suggests there should have been measures of austerity if the economy was so fragile and definitely formation of a big ministry was not justified.

Ministers and the person having the rank and facilities of ministers were then put in charge of not only government ministries but all district administration including each and every position of governmental authority. Positions of semi-government, autonomous bodies, and constitutional positions were filled up with political appointees, irrespective of their professional, educational background, or capability. Only one quality was considered -- the loyalty to the parties of ruling alliance.

With the help of party loyalists, administrative affairs like appointment, promotion, posting, transfer, making of OSD (officer on special duty) or even throwing out by forced retirement were carried out for personal and partisan interest by manipulating the rules, bending or even violating the same, keeping a special eye on the coming election. Idea is to fill up all election related positions with personnel faithful to parties of alliance government. Even the second and third tier of those positions reportedly was filled up in the same way with people having vested interest with the ruling coalition.

Almost all sorts of business, buying, selling, construction, etc. throughout all government semi-government, and other similar offices were done by manipulated tendering and huge sum of money were plundered through corruption by the party leadership with the active co-operation of their planted people in command positions.

Immediate past alliance government considered citizens of the country as voters only, with the distinction of "in favour" or "against" the ruling alliance. They were treated respectively in case of allocating government fund for infrastructural developments and other relief and rehabilitation programs. A special cell was formed in the PM's secretariat for dishing out funds as rewards and restricting the same as punishment in the name of PM's priority or PM's



commitment in a way to influence the next election.

About 70,000 people accused of violence, terrorism, murder, extortion, etc were cleared by the alliance government as soon as they took power. The ground for release was that the cases were filed against innocent people for political harassment by the last Awami League government. As is quite common, there may have been a few cases where innocent people were victimized. But, by and large, majority of the cases were based on factual evidence.

These people were mostly connected with parties belonging to ruling alliance government. On release they along with other musclemen of the ruling party were put above the law. No cases against them were accepted by the police force. In addition, criminals not belonging

to ruling party or alliance were allured to join the party in power by providing similar immunity from police against the threat of being victim of extra-judicial killing by law enforcers in case they refused. Moreover, all musclemen were allowed to participate in corrupt practices to earn huge booty for them.

With sufficient black money and big gangs of goons under their disposal, a partisan Election Commission, and a faithful administration to conduct the election the ruling alliance had to ensure one thing that is to have a loyal chief of caretaker government (CTG) in order to achieve the target of having an un-fair and un-free election which would guarantee success of all their criminal candidates (godfathers).

Just past alliance government made amendment to constitution

to have a particular person of their choice to head CTG. Failing to accomplish that goal under agitation by opposition parties, they maneuvered and misinterpreted the provisions of the constitution to make the ruling party nominated president also the head of CTG. On the last day of the immediate past alliance government the final job was to hand over power to their party nominated president to head a partisan caretaker government with a view to make certain their victory in a fraudulent election.

There should not be any doubt that in case the just past ruling alliance can get away with their sinister design and become successful in having a manipulated result in their favour by not allowing the next general election to be free and fair, there would remain no chance of having a free and fair election in future.

Criminals would continue to get prominence in politics and would eventually take over the society by elbowing out decent people. Citizens would lose their right to elect representatives of their choice and would also lose their power to ensure that the acts of their representatives really stand for the desire of at least a majority of people of the country.

So the current movement for achieving a free and fair election should not be considered a fight for power only, even if that might be in the mind of opposition political parties. It is, in fact, a struggle to secure basic rights in a democratic culture for establishing accountability of government to achieve rule of law and an exploitation-free, happy, and prosperous society.

GM Quader was an MP in the Eight Parliament.

The truth about lies

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

AFTER the reported lying of a responsible man in Bangladesh recently I have been thinking about lies. Why do people lie? What are the types and the consequences of lies? What is the truth about lying?

Internet provides huge amount of information and separation of lies from truth is often difficult. But jokes are another matter. I received a joke from a friend about lies which is as follows:

A man died and went to Heaven. He was curious about a huge wall of clocks and asked, "What are all those clocks?"

St. Peter answered, "Those are Lie-Clocks. Everyone on earth has a Lie-Clock. Every time you lie, the hands on your clock move."

"Oh," said the man. "Whose clock is that?" "That's Mother Teresa's," replied St. Peter. "The hands have never moved, indicating that she never told a lie." "Incredible," said the man.

"And whose clock is that one?" St. Peter responded, "That's Abraham Lincoln's clock."

The hands have moved twice, telling us that he told only two lies in his entire life."

"Where's George W Bush's

clock?" asked the man. "Bush's clock is in Jesus' office. He's using it as a ceiling fan."

The lies about Weapons of Mass Destruction have undermined President Bush's authority significantly. The attempt to pass the blame on flawed intelligence was also rebuffed by the US intelligence community.

There are lies and *nirjola* lies or white lies. Lies are different from fibs which can be excused for their low level consequences and are often personal in nature. There are pathological or compulsive liars, as there are part-time liars who resort to lying for a living. Growing up in a small town, I knew of people who supplemented their income by giving false testimonies in the court of law. They mastered the technique of *nirjola mithha* or *daha miththa* or lying through their teeth.

While some lies are simply absurd more effective lies are those that incorporate some truth in it. A little truth can give a lie some presumed credibility. If I go and tell an innocent person that British Prime Minister Blair is such a *chamcha* (side kick) of George W Bush that he has changed the name of BBC House to Bush House. Here the truth is that the BBC headquarters

is called Bush House, it has been so named for at least 66 years. I conveniently erase history and take advantage of someone's gullibility. Incidentally, the Presidential guest house in Washington, DC is called Blair House and not-named after Prime Minister Blair.

By changing the sequence of history one can also try to make a lie believable. For example, President Bush junior keeps saying that Iraq is a breeding ground of terrorism and if US does not confront them there, US will have to fight them here in US. Now shouldn't US fight them there rather than wait for them to come here (to US)? Those who still support Bush -- the Fox channel viewers, etc. probably found this argument credible. But here the sequence has been changed. Iraq is falling apart and has become a breeding ground of terrorists *only after* the US invasion. No credible proof of Saddam Hussein supporting al-Qaeda has been established.

While vying for Presidential nomination from the Republican Party against Mr. Reagan George H Bush called Reagan's supply-side economics "voodoo economics." Later on, as vice president of President Reagan he once denied it but when the TV network (perhaps,

NBC) pointed out by replaying the speech, Bush senior gave at Carnegie Mellon University, Bush sent a card to the network on which he wrote Bush O NBC 1.

A gentleman will not lie and when is forced to do so under certain political circumstances will confess to it. All you need is to say: sorry. Many people I know of my generation in Bangladesh have a made-up date of birth. Some opt for such manufactured dates for a variety of reasons such as employment. But if you change your date of birth just to undermine a national hero's death anniversary -- that's inhuman.

There are several examples of cynical political lies in Bangladesh. "An ambassador is the one who lies abroad for the good of his/her country." This famous example of pun makes me think that may be many of us have become ambassadors in our own country. This may not be an example of pun but this may be the truth. These local "ambassadors" lie for their own good at the expense of their nation.

The author is a sociology professor and part-time columnist.

Micro-credit comes of age

TREVOR PAGE

BREEZING into Halifax last week, Bangladeshi micro-credit guru Muhammad Yunus and his followers had every reason to be in a buoyant mood. The tiny loans and financial services that he and his supporters provide have helped lift almost 100 million of the world's poorest families out of extreme poverty. Micro-credit, consigned until recently to the fringes of development, is now well on its way to becoming a mainstream method of alleviating poverty.

Over 2,200 development specialists from about 100 countries, along with a sprinkling of presidents, prime ministers and the Queen of Spain, flocked to the Nova Scotia capital for the Global Micro-credit Summit. They were there to take stock of their achievements, agree on ways to speed up progress and endorse a target of reaching 175 million of the world's poorest families (875 million people) by the end of 2015, the deadline set by the United Nations for the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

The pro-poor philosophy of Muhammad Yunus, and the Grameen Bank that he founded 30 years ago, flies in the face of the

conventional banking approach. Where commercial banks would not lend to high-risk customers, the Grameen Bank took them on. Prof Yunus hoped that a small amount of cash to start or expand a business would enable customers to rise out of poverty with dignity. "I used to make a sharp accusation that conventional banks are practicing some kind of financial apartheid," he told a summit news conference last week. And when asked if the World Bank would be taking micro-credit on board, Prof Yunus was reticent. He said although the World Bank's previous president, Jim Wolfensohn, was a strong supporter of micro-credit, even he had been unable to persuade his board of governors to take it on.

And with tens of billions of dollars in micro-credit being disbursed today at interest rates upward of 18 percent, and with 3 billion potential customers out there, commercial banks including Citigroup, ING and Scotia Bank, are beginning to sit up.

There are now over 3,100 institutions worldwide providing micro-credit loans but geographical coverage is uneven. In fact, around one quarter of the world's micro-credit customers are in Bangladesh with a further quarter in India. Sub-Saharan Africa and

Latin America is poorly served but it is the poor in China and India that represent the largest untapped markets. According to Prof Yunus, less than 100,000 of the poor have access to micro-credit in China. The country still lacks the institutional and legal framework to facilitate expansion.

Lennart Bage, the president of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the senior United Nations official at the summit, told me that important as microcredit is, it is not panacea for poverty. "There are larger issues of land, water and politics at the local and national levels and these must also be addressed. So must employment, health, education and infrastructure." IFAD was one of the earliest financial backers of micro-credit and the Grameen Bank.

Orchestrating a global microcredit campaign and summit is no mean feat. Sam Daley-Harris, the director, has done it twice -- in 1997, in Washington, DC for 2,900 participants from 137 countries and now in Halifax. Mr Daley-Harris is the founder of RESULTS, an international citizens' lobby group dedicated to creating the political will to end hunger and poverty. He is one of the driving forces behind the

micro-credit movement.

Winning the Nobel Peace Prize last month has brought appreciably more attention to Prof Yunus and micro-credit. It will likely result in increased contributions from some donor governments and private sources such as the Gates and Clinton foundations. But Prof Yunus says that future of micro-credit should not be dependent on external funding. There are "oceans of money" out in the rural areas, "much of it kept in cash under mattresses on the bed." "We should build a mega port in Bangladesh, one that also serves northeast India and Yunnan province of China. Who would own it? "The poor of Bangladesh!" he said with a smile and a twinkle in his eye. "After all, they own the Grameen Bank."

Prof Yunus is a dreamer. But so are all great men and women. He has brought and dignity to the poor and pride to a country, once described by Henry Kissinger as an international basket case. He has already made the world a better place and given us the formula to empower the poor.

Trevor Page is an international relief and development specialist and commentator who has worked for 35 years for United Nations agencies and NGOs, mainly in Africa and Asia.

Republicans rebuffed

Possibly the best assessment of the debacle of the Republican party came from the Republican senator John McCain, an aspirant presidential candidate for 2008, who is reported to have said: "Many of our voters have begun to believe that we value power over principle." That is why in, fact, voters have spoken on election day about the Republican's arrogance and culture of corruption.

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

ALTHOUGH a two-party system has been in existence in the United States since 1797, American voters, by and large, take the presidential elections, which take place in November every four years, seriously. This year a mid-term election of Congress has generated enthusiasm among the voters, irrespective of ethnic groups.

Voters would support candidates who had to make tough decisions on the issues, both domestic and

international, that are affecting the people of America. The beauty of the mid-term election is that apart from the presentation of popular candidates by the parties concerned, important issues are reflected on ballot paper. Therefore, the voters not only elect their representatives, but express their opinion on the issues as well.

This year Republican losses in the House and the Senate could be attributed to President Bush's low performance rating in handling state affairs: 57 percent disapproved of his performance in office,

while 59 percent were either angry or dissatisfied with his administration's corruption. Political analysts hold the view that the November 7 mid-term election was a referendum on the war in Iraq. The third issue was the performance of the Republican dominated Congress: 61 percent disapproved of their performance.

In this midterm election a huge number of women voters exercised their right of franchise to register their opinions on important issues facing the country. There is no doubt that the results are a reflection

of the American voters' frustration with the Republicans. The scandals, corruption, indictments, resignation of leaders, investigations, the torture of prisoners and surveillance on Americans continued to dominate the news in the days on the eve of the elections that changed the political landscape.

In the mid-term election the wind blew in favour of the Democratic Party as can be seen from the polls result which indicates that one-third of the electorates voted to send a message of opposition to the president. Among the voters who backed the president's re-election in 2004, one in six voted for Democrat House candidates. Across the country, President Bush's unpopularity was, in fact a burden for many Republicans to bear.

The election result was also a rebuff to the president's top strategist Karl Rove's plan to make

national security and war on terrorism the election issues, while the president was focusing on the economic growth and low employment rate over the years. The voters did not buy their arguments. While admitting that terrorism was an important issue, a majority of them voted in favour of Democrats, which implies that voters have no confidence in the Republican leadership. Voters gave the economy a negative rating. Corruption was considered extremely important by the voters: 62 percent disapproved of the role of the Congress.

With war and scandals driving the vote, Democrats succeeded in nationalizing the campaign. Two important non-political watchdog organizations -- MoveOn and Answer coalition -- contributed in organizing a large voter turnout as a result of their relentless campaign against the war in Iraq. For exam-

ple, thousands of people across the country participated in protest demonstrations against the war in Iraq on October 28 -- just 8 days before the elections.

Some misleading flyers, telephone calls to voters diverting their attention on the election day, and negative ads on TV boomeranged on the Republican candidates. For example, the Republican senator in Virginia, George Allen, spent a lot of money portraying Democrat candidate Jim Webb as being anti-women. The results were contrary to what the Republicans expected: 55 percent of women voted in favour of Jim Webb, who is an anti-war activist, and unseated the Republican senator. George Allen was aspiring for presidential candidature.

The results of the mid-term elections were a major setback for the president, who will remain in

power for a period of two more years. Mid-term election incidentally, typically cost the president's party seats in a second term. This happened during the second term presidency of Richard Nixon in 1974, but did not happen during the presidency of Bill Clinton in 1998.

The verdict of the people gives the impression that the American voters, particularly the middle class, can't be taken for granted by either political party. Voters in some states rejected illegal immigration and approved raising of the minimum wage for the working class, whereas the Republican-led federal government refused to raise the minimum wage for nearly a decade.

The message of the voters is clear and loud: end the war in Iraq, bring back American troops -- ending occupation, raise minimum wage for working class, establish

high moral ethics in the Congress and checks and balances for the executive branch of the government. Many analysts are of the opinion that the results reflect a national sentiment that has soured on Republicans, President Bush, and war in Iraq.

Possibly the best assessment of the debacle of the Republican party came from the Republican senator John McCain, an aspirant presidential candidate for 2008, who is reported to have said: "Many of our voters have begun to believe that we value power over principle." That is why in, fact, voters have spoken on election day about the Republican's arrogance and culture of corruption.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former diplomat, writes from Virginia.