

It's a small world after all

NAEEM MOHAEMEN

PARALLELS between countries can be banal but also illustrative. The last time I explored similarities with US history was when I wrote against the Bangladesh government's expanded surveillance powers. After reading Asif Saleh's analysis of our broken voter list, I thought it was time to look at similar examples from the American elections.

As Saleh explains, the new Bangladesh voter list shows a gigantic 22% growth, reaching a voter base of 9.13 crore (60% of the population). According to 2001 census estimates, and factoring in 5% non-listing for various factors, the actual number of voters should be closer to 7.5 crore. After the new list came out, sample analysis of 20 districts showed 15% fictional voters on average. Given that in 2001 BNP won 108 seats with a vote margin between 5-15%, the significance of 15% extra voters is obvious.

These 15% extra voters will clearly be the "vote bank" of the BNP deployed strategically in areas where the party looks likely to lose. In addition to traditional methods of disenfranchising AL-loyal vot-

ers, ethnic and religious profiling can be used effectively.

As I discussed in an earlier essay, "To The Polls, Unless Your Name Be Das, Tripura, or Roy" (11/3/06), out of 300 constituencies, there are 71 where minority voters are significant (ranging from 11% to 61%) and 50 where they are visible (5-10%). Presuming that Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Pahari, and Adivasi voters are more likely to vote for the AL, there has been a familiar pattern of aggressively blocking these voters, and punishing them afterwards (as in the 2001 post-election bloodbath against Hindu voters).

Given that most Bengali names carry signposts of religious and ethnic background, it is simple enough to take people off the rolls based on last names like Majhi, Sen, Soren, Shankar, or Larma. Vote dacoits can also focus on the geographically defined boundaries of Chittagong Hill Tracts, home to our largest non-Bengali bloc of Jumma Pahari people. Ethnic cleansing for three decades will now be followed by erasure at the ballot box.

I was thinking of this Bangla minority vote while sitting at a screening of the new documentary *American Blackout*. In the US context, the closest parallel to the

Hindu/Pahari bloc is the African-American vote, which has historically tilted towards the Democratic Party by an overwhelming majority. In the 2000 and 2004 elections, there were major voting discrepancies in the battleground states of Florida and Ohio, and some areas of alleged vote fraud were also heavily African-American.

After the 2000 hanging chad debacle, a friend said to me: "We do our cheating in plain sight, but since America is in the first world, *chor-tam-ta kore style kore*." Yes it's true, sophisticated skulduggery is employed to grease the results towards the Republicans. In more recent times, this has centered on new electronic voting machines -- which are vulnerable to techniques of e-theft because of the lack of a paper trail. It is well known that hackers can break into these machine's security barriers with little effort. As *Blackout* documents in detail, in many Ohio districts where there was a significant increase in Black voters, the number of voting machines were actually reduced. This meant many voters were unable to cast their vote because of long lines and delays.

Even the 2006 US midterms have indications of vote fraud. In

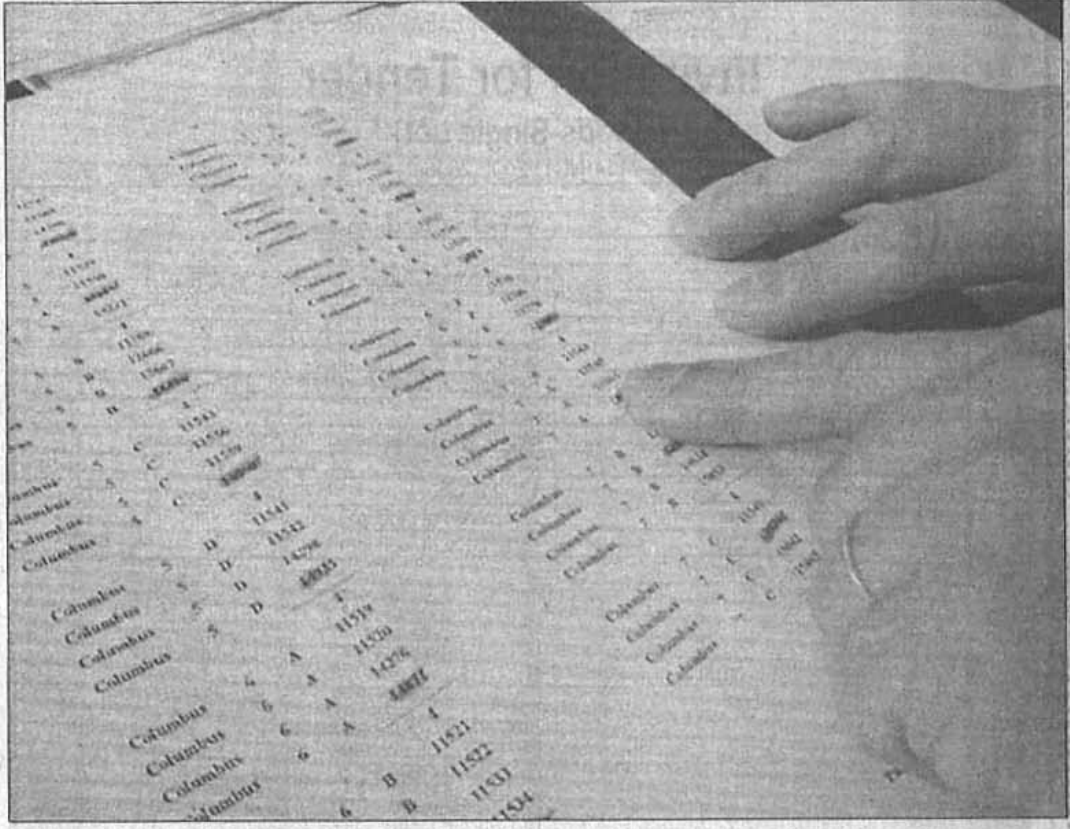
Florida's Sarasota county, 18,000 voters (15% of those who voted by machine) did not have their votes recorded. This matters tremendously in a close race where Republican Vern Buchanan won by only 369 votes. Because the Democrats' overall margin of victory was so large, these cases have not become big news. But if the 2008 elections are hard-fought, all these issues will return.

American Blackout is part of a nationwide, concerted effort by activists to fight back against vote rigging. The film is produced by GNN (Guerrilla News Network), a grassroots media channel that fights against corporate domination of news. The film's director Ian Inaba has also started an organization called VideoTheVote.org, which sends volunteers with video cameras all over the country to document voter fraud. Consider this a dry run for the 2008 elections, when media and youth groups like VideoTheVote.org will join the battle.

Talking to Ian after the screening, I discussed the similarities between the US electoral mess and the voter list crisis in Bangladesh. The one divergence is that a legal process is (still) available for American voters to challenge vote rigging (Ian made frequent refer-

ences to "an army of lawyers"). Resources are also a key issue. *Blackout* has been showing at cities all over the US, and at every screening new volunteers sign up to join VideoTheVote.

Bangladesh's own tussle over CTG, CEC, and ghost voters will continue. Whether a new voter list is created, or we are moved by brute force to a bogus election, it's absolutely essential that media activists join forces to use video, photography and other methods to document voting abuses, both before and during the elections. The experiences of African-American voters remind us that voter fraud and intimidation, particularly of minorities, are not unique to the Bangla borders. Valuable lessons can be learnt from activists like Inaba and GNN, who are not waiting for mainstream political parties like the Democrats to come to the rescue. We need to fund and support grassroots Bengali activists who use ingenuity, people power, media and technology to fix a broken system.



Still from *American Blackout*, showing how voting machines were taken away from majority-black voting areas.

Economic challenges for the next government

We are standing at a turning point in the history of Bangladesh. On one hand, we are upholding the core values of democracy by holding election for the fourth time. On the other hand, the light of realistic prospects for a brighter future is beckoning us from the horizon. We will probably not get such a great chance again to change the fate of millions of people in this country.

MAMUN RASHID

THE oath that the people's representatives take, or had taken in the past, to uphold democratic values is, or was, mostly for economic emancipation of our people. Whoever wins the next polls will get people's mandate, but will also be confronted with economic policies and management issues that were taken by the previous government. With the interim caretaker government finally focusing on peaceful holding of election, transition to the next elected government, and business as usual, this write up is all about the challenges that the next government is going to face.

The immediate and most important challenge for the new government -- the development of the country's vital infrastructures will be critical for sustaining economic growth. The foundation of today's modern economies depends on the robustness of its infrastructures. Unfortunately for

Bangladesh, we have seen near collapse of the power sector, perennial congestion and inefficiency at the ports, and mismanaged transportation system.

Of utmost importance is improvement in the efficiency of ports, addressing issues such as congestion, container handling, corruption etc. Besides Chittagong port, attempts need to be made to enhance usage of Mongla port. Equally critical is ensuring supply of electricity in tandem with the growth in demand by consumer and industrial segments.

Prolonged power crisis, such as the one prevailing, could cripple the economy and reverse the economic growth achieved. Worse yet, lack of clear measures from the government in meeting the power crisis hits at the heart of business and consumer confidence, with far reaching implications. For long-term power supply to the nation, the coal sector should be developed with appropriate attention as it can meet the country's energy

needs for the next 30 years, as compared to about 10/15 years of proven gas reserves.

Improvements need to be made in the land, river, and air transportation sectors as well in order to reduce the cost of doing business. A vicious circle of corruption wraps the maintenance work of our roads and highways, which reflects badly on their quality and require frequent repairs. Navigable waterways have shamefully been reduced over the years due to lack of dredging. For all these, what is needed is formulation of long-term plans, efficient implementation and candid evaluation. The next government has to meet these challenges with high level of skills.

Before setting up economic policies, issues with respect to the context or environment in which the policies will be implemented need to be adequately attended to. There is concern that the state and the power structures are gradually getting separated from the majority of the people. During the last

two decades, the economy of Bangladesh has been growing at a rate of 5% on an average. But the benefit of this growth did not reach the majority of the people. As a result, the gap between the poor and the rich is widening day by day. Wealth is being concentrated in the hands of a small group of people, which is mostly close to the ruling regimes. Most people think that the state is only taking care of the rich, while ignoring the poor, or at the cost of the poor. Regardless of how hard the government tries, its policies are bound to fail unless it wins the trust of the majority.

The second factor is the ineffectiveness of vital institutions. Social, political and economic constituents of the state structure lost their credibility due to lack of proper governance and accountability. Deaths of institutional credibility has rendered proper implementation of economic policies nearly impossible. The next government has to think seriously about how to return credibility and effectiveness to the public institutions. It has to work hard to bring about a positive change in the quality of leadership of different institutions, enabling them to make prudent decisions with courage and efficiency.

Now let us talk about economic policies. There is consensus among the political parties regarding open

market economy. So, little scope remains for any change on this front. However, we are still at liberty to improve plans on how we will make the market mechanism work for us in this open economic environment. Recently, the policy-makers were troubled on issues of how the future investments in our economy will be financed to sustain growth.

Our domestic savings are increasing but it is not sufficient to sustain the needed growth, as is the case in many developing countries. Alternatives to domestic savings could be foreign aid, loans, or international commercial capital. International commercial capital can be attained through foreign direct investment (FDI) or loans from international capital markets.

The foreign aid, or debt, that the government receives from donors is usually on soft terms, and of long tenure in nature. These loans are often not associated with proper accountability, raising serious doubts about their effectiveness. Moreover, the amount of such subsidized funds is limited and is inadequate for fuelling growth.

The remaining options at hand are FDI and borrowing from international capital markets. However, both options have their demerits too. Corruption and mismanagement create the possibility for

improper allocation of the loans collected from international commercial sources. Sourcing of the incremental investment that is needed to sustain and enhance the growth rate would be a challenge for next government, and it should be put on the priority agenda.

There is also a sensitive issue for the next government to handle, which is how and what amount of subsidy should be given, and why. The state could give subsidy to the deprived people so they do not get disoriented from the majority. However, it is time to question the effectiveness and justification of subsidies that are drawn in the name of the poor but ultimately end up in the hands of a small group of influential people.

In an economy of limited means, such as ours, prevention of this wastage in the name of subsidy could free up resources for much needed productive use. Examples of loss-making state owned enterprises abound. In this context, we can cite examples of Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) and Bangladesh Biman, which receive substantial amount of subsidy from the government. The next government needs to ask itself the rationale for providing such subsidy. Perhaps, privatization of these entities, or infusion of private capital, would have reduced losses

on the part of the government, along with the blame for failure.

Development of agriculture is closely linked with the improvement of the lives of millions. But lack of proper planning has put our agricultural sector in an adverse and backward position. Agriculture and agro-based products have to be upgraded to an attractive industry through integration of modern technology and application of commercial capital, otherwise economic emancipation of the people cannot be thought of. This is a major challenge for the next government.

We have been perpetually neglecting the domestic capital market in our economic policies and plans. Had there been a vibrant domestic capital market, it would have expedited our industrial growth. Effectiveness of our capital market should be evaluated on its ability to provide the right incentive and support to the industrial and other business entities. Moreover, we need to improve coordination among different departments of the government such as the Securities & Exchange Commission, Bangladesh Bank, etc. The revival of capital market would be another challenge for the next government.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) plays a critical role in today's eco-

nomical lifeline. Unfortunate but true, we do not have any plan on how we can capitalize on this sector to give a boost to our economy. We do not have adequate knowledge of the ICT sector, but worse yet, we do not also think adequately of how we can build our knowledge in this sector. On the other hand, our neighbouring countries have expedited their economic growth by application of ICT. The next government should think about developing this sector with export-led objectives.

We are standing at a turning point in the history of Bangladesh. On one hand, we are upholding the core values of democracy by holding election for the fourth time. On the other hand, the light of realistic prospects for a brighter future is beckoning us from the horizon.

We will probably not get such a great chance again to change the fate of millions of people in this country. At this juncture, the people of this country expect the next government to bring transparency in economic activities and policy-making. We all hope that the next government will reach a broad-based consensus with respect to strategy for economic development. For this, we all have to unite, and even be ready to make big sacrifices.

The writer is a banker.

Nepal: Agreement and interregnum

SAGAR SHRESTHA

THE magnanimity of Nepal's politicians was obvious in their willingness to provide the Maoists a presence in the interim government and interim legislature equal to that of the two large parliamentary parties. The sacrifice made by the CPN (UML) in this regard is noteworthy, for it has allowed the perception to develop that a gun-wielding rebel group has equal status as a party which has stayed steadfastly within non-violent practice.

The rebels now have to traverse a vast ideological distance when serving in government and the hybrid interim legislature, where they will have to jettison practiced rigid polemic and replace it with principled positioning. Can they adjust to the practicalities of governance, so far removed from gun-in-hand sloganeering? Ideologue Baburam Bhattarai does maintain that this is the time to concentrate on delivering the constituent assembly, which will tackle the larger issues of state transformation; but we have to see how things play out around the cabinet roundtable and in the interim House.

Dahal and Bhattarai now also need all their dialectical skills -- so clearly visible in Delhi recently, where they shed all pretence of the anti-

Indianism that has been the leit-motif of their rebellion -- to manage the myriad contradictions of an ideology-driven insurgency that has not publicly conceded defeat. They understand better than many Kathmandu-based analysts that the people in the districts are sullen with the years they have suffered under the commissars and militia. But unlike Gyanendra the king, the Maoist leadership will hopefully not miscalculate the democratic values held dear by a rational, sophisticated populace.

The Nepali proclivity to conduct negotiations in the full glare of floodlights week after week might have exasperated some foreign observers, but one could say that these were the most "transparent" negotiations to be conducted anywhere -- an example, indeed, for the world. More importantly, the public sharing of the daily ups and downs provided a crucial cushion to prepare the Maoist fighters for the changing times. While not mentioned in any of the celebratory prose, the Indian government's positioning on the guns-and-government issue obviously played a part in moderating rebel demands, while the UN role in overseeing "arms management" and the election process has provided some confidence in the outcome all around.

In fact, the politicians and peasantry alike are relying too much on the United Nations mechanisms -- Ian Martin's office and the OHCHR in particular -- for the monitoring of the peace agreement and attendant ceasefire and human rights matters. They will not have enough reach if Nepal's government administration does not activate itself, and if civil society gets drowned in the upcoming "donor tsunami" and neglects to be a proper watchdog of the people. With the National Human Rights Commission as a broken entity, we must have a monitoring committee of half-a-dozen eminent persons to hold the state and rebels to account. But it must be one that does not resemble the ungainly truce monitoring committee set up in June with more than two-and-a-half dozen members.

Even as the PLA fighters arrive by the thousands at designated campsites that are as yet without infrastructure, the term "militia" does not find mention in the lengthy agreement document. And it is the rebel paramilitary -- especially the opportunistic "Maoists" among them who do not have the ideological commitment of the mainline cadre -- which would most likely contribute to destabilising the polity in the days ahead. There is scepticism about how a government with Maoist participation will deal with wayward militia, and this is where Dahal will have to show an improved record compared to the months past.

Krishna Prasad Sitaula deserves congratulations as the impresario of the peace agreement, having nurtured it since the semi-secret confabulations in New Delhi in the autumn of 2005. However, it is time now for the home minister to get a handle on national law and order. Without the presence of a highly motivated and committed Nepal Police force in the villages, and motivated district administrations all over, the state will remain absent from the rural hinterland. And without it, there will be precious little governance or peace dividend, as far as the people are concerned.

If and when the populace becomes disenchanted with the lack of governance or with severe

delivery, the reactionaries in the palace, army, and the erstwhile power elite will perceive an opportunity to make a move. There is no doubt that the Nepal army can still swing back to the palace like a released spring, should the interim government be seen to falter. This potential reactionary threat must be understood by the politicians of the SPA, but even more so by the Maoist leadership, so they can hold back on their public radicalism in the House and Cabinet.

A possible rightist reaction is one more reason why an enormous effort must be made to conduct the constituent assembly elections by early June. Shifting the polls to post-monsoon, possibly post-Dasain/Tihar 2007, will surely destabilise the state. Besides the unending sankramankaal interregnum with its attendant weak government, poor service delivery to the citizenry, and the Maoist fighters in the cantonments, would represent a pressure-cooker of discontent that could explode with great violence. Nepal would become a tinderbox, which even the monsoon rains would not be able to douse.

With the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in place, and as the government administration seeks to re-establish itself all over the country, it is finally incumbent upon the political parties to enter the villages and not remain diffidently sequestered in district headquarters. The promise of the April Uprising was the sidelining of the gun and the revival of politics. This required crushing the royal design and bringing the Maoists into open politics, before heading for the constituent assembly. That process is taking longer than expected, which is why all energy must now be concentrated on pushing through the constituent assembly by early June.

If this unexpectedly lengthy sankramankaal is not to make the people disconsolate, the political parties and all layers of civil society must work together to give the people hope. And by "political parties," we hope to also mean the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).

Rickshaws, not sports cars

Not every element you need is manufactured locally. The chain and a few other key parts are imported from China and India. It is a very impressive fact that we manufacture most of the parts ourselves. I asked the workers in the workshops (who became quite friendly with me) about the reason behind our dependence on foreign countries to make even this small machine. They informed me that the chain manufactured in the local workshops has a history of inaccuracy and failure. It lets you see the fact that Bangladesh is still quite immature in the field of the production of engineering elements that are a little complex. Apparently the humble rickshaw has managed to escape everyone's attention!

MUHAMMAD EUSHA

RICKSHAWS that we see on the roads of Dhaka have essentially become a very important element of the lives of a wide range of people over the last century. The emotional attachment that we have with this simple machine has hardly anything to do with the mechanical or the engineering build that a rickshaw has.

Originally invented in Japan, a rickshaw has not received as much technical attention as it deserves, considering the fact that it is the only source of income for millions of families across our country. Being a student of mechanical engineering at BUET, this truly interesting machine caught my attention a year back and I took the opportunity of studying it closely.

It stood before me as a perfect implementation of our courses on machine design that are taught inside the classes. The machine that earns the daily food of millions amazed me far more than a posh European sports car! It was not long before I started to detect the technical shortcomings of the popular rickshaw that we find on the road these days.

The significant characteristics that are present in the engineering of these rickshaws make it inhumanly hard for the person who is pulling it. I can remember a doctor joking with my friend who suffered from extra fat, prescribing

rickshaw-pulling as his exercise! The puller has to be strong and young; the aged ones often are scolded by the passenger to pull faster.

Achieving the acceleration seems to be very strenuous even though keeping a steady velocity later on becomes relatively easier. The aerodynamic design consideration is another important issue. A windy day often becomes a day of harsh adversity for the puller.

Rainy days bring rather strange problems. The puller pulls defenseless against the rain while the passenger tries to hide beneath a piece of plastic paper which looks very inhuman indeed. I will prefer not to expatiate on how inhuman it actually looks as it does not concern the subject matter of this essay. Only that sight alone states how ignored this transport has always been because engineers are only interested in working for big names like Toyota or McLaren designing sports cars even though, in the context of a poor country like Bangladesh, a rickshaw plays a very important role (the most important role, according to many) in public transport.

But who cares about a thing as trivial as a rickshaw in Bangladesh if you are working for a German automobile giant! The reader will be able to perceive the amount of negligence the rickshaws receive even after being so important if

you think for a moment about the fact that even a fifth grade student will be able to propose a better protection against the rain for the puller and no one ever bothered spending a few hours on thinking about it let alone taking practical steps.

Moving on, an uncomfortable seat and poor sitting arrangements decrease the satisfaction of the passenger, adding more to the pile of the problems. The absence of effective shock absorbers brings discomfort to the puller as well as the passenger. I started thinking about a better design if it was achievable, as I am sorry to see that this earning machine of the poor has not received any attention of the engineers that we produce every year in our country. I had a feeling that, if the purpose of my education has nothing to do with helping the poor, who are, of course, the majority of our population, then we are simply holding ourselves back from going forward. A few illiterate machinists who have no solid base of theoretical science are the only ones who tried working on the rickshaw design improvements. They did nothing but sustaining the front part design of the rickshaw and adding necessary sitting arrangements in the back. The idea of turning a bicycle in a three-wheel rickshaw is a very good one. But can we not take it further?

I made regular visits to the

rickshaw workshops in Old Dhaka to study the assembling process as well as the manufacturing of various integrated parts that make up a whole rickshaw. An ordinary rickshaw usually costs around Tk 12,000 and is readily available to be purchased. The price is going higher day by day as childish efforts of beautifying the rickshaw making it more uncomfortable for the puller continue.

Not every element you need is manufactured locally. The chain and a few other key parts are imported from China and India. It is a very impressive fact that we manufacture most of the parts ourselves. I asked the workers in the workshops (who became quite friendly with me) about the reason behind our dependence on foreign countries to make even this small machine. They informed me that the chain manufactured in the local workshops has a history of inaccuracy and failure. It lets you see the fact that Bangladesh is still quite immature in the field of the production of engineering elements that are a little complex. Apparently the humble rickshaw has managed to escape everyone's attention!

I have been working on a paper for a few months on the design considerations of the rickshaw, searching for improvements. A few technical suggestions can quite clearly be given to reduce the effort to pull the rickshaw, make it affordable and cheap, an efficient transport.

Over-design and exaggeration in unnecessary decorations can be marked as two very significant problems. I would prefer not to make the readers yawn mentioning the engineering analysis on the improvement suggestions. I will continue studying this magnificent machine and in the future, when I become an engineer, finally, I wish to take practical steps in making this machine an easy one to drive.



Nepalese Maoist chairman, Pushpa Kamal Dahal (R), popularly known as "Prachanda" listens to his number two commander Baburam Bhattarai (L) during a media interaction in New Delhi.

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