

# Electoral Process in South Asia

*Imagination is more important than knowledge*  
— Albert Einstein

## Electoral System in Pakistan: Issues in Debate

by I A Rehman

PAKISTAN'S need to develop an election system which not only cements democratic legitimacy on the custodian of state authority but also fosters progressive growth of institutions of governance remains high on the national agenda. A recapitulation of the experience of the 5th general election in 12 years will serve to highlight some of the main features of the ongoing discourse.

The election was held following the dissolution of the National Assembly (and provincial assemblies in quick succession) and dismal federal and provincial governments. The environment was found to be not conducive to a normal, straightforward political contest between the contenders for power. In such situations the party ousted from power can possibly gain if public perception of its performance in government is favourable. Otherwise it goes before the people with a severe handicap, especially if the sacking of its government is endorsed by the judiciary, as happened in Pakistan's case. Although now the possibility of a government being dismissed on constitutional grounds has disappeared, Pakistan's experience deserves consideration by South Asian neighbours or whatever the

head of the state enjoys discretionary powers to call for elections earlier than they are due. The reason as the general election was announced the issue of authentic and up-to-date voters' list again cropped up. A considerable section of political opinion demanded the holding of election on the basis of electoral rolls prepared in accordance with a new census after which redistribution of National Assembly seats among the provinces would also have become a constitutional obligation. Some even pressed for the postponement of election till these formalities had been completed. These pleas were rejected by both the executive and the judiciary. The non-availability of authentic and up-to-date voters' list is an issue of concern to all South Asian countries and one on which they may need to learn from one another.

However, one good thing that happened was that the adult franchise was extended to the tribal belt (population estimated at nearly four million) by a presidential order. Despite the constraints of time and resources, 1,595 million voters, all new except for 37,719 traditionally privileged ones, were enrolled, including 403,163 women, representing a major political leap forward for the

people concerned. Several decisions were taken to reinforce public confidence in the fairness of the polls. These included simultaneous one-day poll for the National and provincial assemblies, conduct of polls through wider control of judicial officers, and involvement of the army in a supervisory role and for the maintenance of order. The last mentioned decision found favour neither with domestic opinion nor with foreign observers. However necessary the troops in force on election duty, their presence in the prevailing state of the political polarisation in the country betrayed not only the fragile state of democracy but also lack of interest in looking for alternative means of guaranteeing polls free from violence and forcible manipulation of voting and counting of ballots. As was to be expected the deployment of troops in force on election duty, not only around the polling stations but also inside the booths, and the zeal for active participation in the electoral process shown by them at some places, encouraged the raising of the quite a few complaints of use of undue influence. Since many of the irregularities lumped together in the category of rigging, such as impersonation, unauthorised stuffing of

the ballot boxes, interference with the duties of the polling agents and polling staff, snatching of ballot boxes, booth-capturing, etc. are also heard during election in other South Asian countries, this is another area in which there is room for sharing of information and experience among them and for collaborative work in search of democratic political answers.

As regards attempts to close the electoral arena to the corrupt, reliance was placed on changes in the Representation of the People Act to disqualify defaulters on sizeable loans and utility bills, stricter requirements for filing returns of election expenses, enforcement of a rule for yearly statements of assets and liabilities by elected representatives, and speedier decisions on election petitions. The process of changes in these measures during the phase of their formulation considerably reduced their efficacy and left the public largely unsatisfied. These measures have since lapsed and there is considerable support for the Election Commission's plea for regular enactments to feel the void. The matter is common to all South Asian countries since the public in

each one is greatly concerned at the entry of criminals in legislatures. It is also obviously related to the increasingly felt need for the due transparency in all state institutions across South Asia. The urgency of regional consultation on the means of introducing adequate transparency and effective accountability mechanisms not only in electoral matters but also in the entire field of state's functioning is manifest. Among other things, it may be necessary to consider strengthening of judicial institutions, enlarging the area of media freedom, and guaranteeing the people access to information in official records.

Voter apathy had been identified as a matter of concern even before the election. The Election Commission made an effort to prompt the voters to raise their interest in the electoral process and considerable goading was done by the media. Political parties too tried to enliven the masses. However, these efforts produced only marginal results.

However, public apathy towards elections is too basic to the whole democratic system to be ignored. Voters' education and generation of debates on political issues during the elec-

torial processes need much more attention than paid hitherto in almost all South Asian states. It is in this context that the issue of election monitoring by non-official groups needs to be examined.

However, a number of issues remained unaddressed during Pakistan's 1997 general election. These included the much criticised system of separate electorates, meagre participation of women in the political process as reflected in the small number of women candidates and their negligible representation in legislatures, the non-creation of a multi-member permanent Election Commission and its need for maximum independence from the executive, the small size of assemblies which necessitate large constituencies and blocks the entry of less affluent candidates in the electoral contest, the quaint provision for the reservation of seats for ulama and technocrats in the upper house and the manner of filling the tribal areas' seats in it, enlargement of facilities for enforcement on electoral issues, and voting rights of prisoners and nationals residing abroad.

It seems necessary to take a stock of some of the developments since the 1997 election. The 13th amendment to the constitution abolished the pres-

ident's power to dissolve the National Assembly. Strictly speaking this matter may not be considered relevant to the electoral process but it deserves attention because it raises an issue related to the life and protection of elected bodies. Protection of elected parliaments against discretionary intervention by the chief executive of the state presupposes principled functioning of governments and support institutions of the civil society, such as the media and professional associations. Questions may arise when the functioning of governments may open the way to extra-constitutional remedies. The need to introduce a system of elected representatives' recall by voters has sometimes been discussed in nearly all South Asian countries. While a detailed study of this proposal is necessary, possibilities of strengthening the system of checks and balances also need to be explored and collaborative effort at the regional level should be rewarding.

Even more clearly evident is the need for a collaborative review of the defection provisions in South Asian countries. Pakistan's effort in this area took the form of the 14th amendment to the constitution but it has thrown up more issues than

this one it supposedly solved. The amendment made the party bosses sole arbiters of parliamentarians' defection from their platforms adopted before or after the poll. Although the Supreme Court excluded expression of dissent within parties from evidence of defection, the 14th amendment is open to criticism. It does not take into consideration the possibility of a sizeable group breaking away from a party on matters of principle of conscience, such as the India system takes into account. In actual practice this amendment operates as a constitutional bar to free debate within political parties and impedes the process of their democratisation. There is no gaining saying that good electoral processes are not consolidated in a vacuum. They are sustained by the freedom and quality of debate in both elected bodies and political parties and anything that adversely affects such debates detracts from the quality of electoral processes. In the area of anti-defection measures, too, the need for South Asian regional consultation and collaboration is potentially obvious.

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## Proposed Reforms to the Electoral System of Sri Lanka

by Sundari de Alwis

THE strengthening of the authority and independence of the office of the Commissioner of Elections, introducing a hybrid form of electoral system (mixed electoral system), and encouraging a better calibre of politicians to vie for office by providing freedom of consent of members, are considered important aspects of such reforms.

**Proportional Representation System**

The system of Proportional Representation introduced by the Second Republican Constitution of 1978 was intended to overcome some of the more glaring deficiencies of the simple plurality or 'first past the post' system which had existed in Sri Lanka since independence.

Ideally, the electoral system adopted by Sri Lanka should accurately reflect the popular mandate, be easily understood by the average voter, encourage political diversity and allow for the freedom of the conscience of Members of Parliament. The ideal system should enable the electorate direct access to the elected representative. All these

requirements are met by the so called 'mixed electoral system', or what is known as the German Model.

The basic features of this system and its application is that one half of the members are elected from constituencies on the simple plurality (first past the post) system. The other half of the members are elected from national lists submitted by parties. The rank order of candidates are determined by the parties at the time of nomination.

The voter is given one ballot paper to elect members for his/her constituency and another ballot paper to vote for the party of his/her choice (National List). A voter may cast these votes either for the same party or for different parties.

The allocation of seats in Parliament is determined strictly in proportion to the votes received by each party/group for its National List in the following manner:

i. The votes in the constituencies are counted and the candidate receiving the highest number of votes is declared elected.

ii. The votes polled by each party/group on the National List are counted and their respective national percentage determined.

iii. The number of seats allocated to each party/group is determined on the basis of such national percentages.

iv. The candidates who obtained the highest amount of votes in each of the constituencies are declared elected. Thereafter, based on the percentage of votes polled by the respective party on their National List, a proportion of it's National List candidates will be declared elected ensuring that the total number of seats allotted to each party will be in proportion to the votes received by such party nationally.

If subsequently, a vacancy was to occur in a constituency seat, such vacancy would be filled at a by-election. If a vacancy occurs in a national seat, such vacancy would be filled by the person whose name appears next in order of priority on the National List of the party to which such outgoing member belonged to.

Critics of the German model argue that it creates two classes

of MPs, with different if not conflicting interests. Another criticism of the proposed 'mixed system' is that it would be difficult for smaller parties to field and support National List candidates or for that matter, to participate in an election at national level.

**PR and the Conscience of the MP**

The constitutional and legislative provisions in Sri Lanka prevent cross-overs and permit parties to expel members from Parliament - This in turn stifles the independence of elected representatives. However, it is important to note that this feature is not an essential attribute of the system of proportional representation and indeed most countries practicing proportional representation ensure that their elected representatives are free to vote according to their conscience, free from instructions from any source.

Contrastingly, in Sri Lanka a duly elected Member of Parliament - once elected on a party ticket, cannot transfer

his/her allegiance to a different political party and thereafter continue to occupy his/her seat. If the member resigns or is expelled from the party, or crosses over to another party, the inevitable consequence is the forfeiture of the seat in Parliament.

The main justification for the stifling of freedom of conscience of MPs is the widely held view that the system of proportional representation necessarily entails diminution in the freedom of MPs. It is implied that under the PR system, it is the party that receives the votes rather than the individual candidate, and that MPs are bound by the dictates of the party.

However the basis of modern representative democracy is that governmental power should not be exercised arbitrarily but on behalf of the citizens of the country. The legislature, therefore, should consist of representatives of the PEOPLE whose primary responsibility is to them, rather than to a party or a party leader.

**Commissioner of Elections**

Strengthening the authority and independence of the Commissioner of Elections and his office is of paramount importance in the exercise of reforming the electoral process.

The Office of the Commissioner of Elections in Sri Lanka is constitutionally weak. A study of the electoral laws show that the Commissioner of Elections is hampered by limitations on his powers. Presently the Commissioner is appointed by the President. He will hold office during good behaviour and could be removed from office on extremely flimsy grounds.

A main concern regarding the powers of the Commissioner of Elections is that he does not have any control over the conduct of the Police and other military personnel on duty during elections. This in turn makes it virtually impossible for the Election Department to take prompt action, on complaints of violations of Election Laws.

Ideally, the Commissioner of Elections should be empow-

ered to: prepare electoral registers, conduct elections, control all state agents connected to the elections (including the police and military deployed in connection with an election), receive elections complaints from candidates or parties and take appropriate action and monitor the adjudication of election violations in the post-election period.

With existing deficiencies in the powers of the Commissioner of Elections and his apparent lack of independence, a school of thought has developed for the establishment of a statutory multi-member Election Commission.

This has been proposed by both the Government and the main Opposition party with varying degrees of autonomy. Nevertheless in order for such a Commission to be effective it is necessary that one is aware of the certain pitfalls that such Commission may entail.

One of the negative aspects of appointing such a Commission would be that in a culture of avoiding responsibility and simply passing the buck to another, it would not be possible to hold any one person respon-

sible for the conduct of free and fair elections. A suitable alternative would be to introduce the Elections Commission as well as retain the Office of Commissioner of Elections. The Commissioner should be the Chairman of the Commission and be held responsible for the conduct of free and fair elections.

Suggestions have also been made for an amendment to the Constitution where a politically 'neutral' government body appoint the Commissioner of Elections in order to ensure the independence and impartiality of the office. Such a body could include members of both the ruling and opposition parties or individuals entirely divorced from politics.

However a recent Supreme Court decision on election laws has helped to strengthen the view that even under the present Constitutional provisions, the Commissioner of Elections is the sole authority for the exercise, performance and discharge of the various duties and functions set out for him in the election laws.

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## Electoral Process in Bangladesh

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Parliament 'is not required (legally) to enroll as a voter in the electoral roll of any constituency of the country'. But this, I believe, is less of a problem, for the practice has been that the candidate does enroll as a voter in the constituency from which s/he is competing. This is not to underestimate the importance of and the critics' plea for a legal framework for the candidate's enrollment as a voter.

What is of serious problem, however, is that the candidate need not actually be a 'resident' of the constituency from which s/he is contesting. Presently, most of the candidates are able to enroll as voters in their respective constituencies by way of liberally interpreting, if not flouting, the clause requiring residency. There is an urgent need to include in the qualification, not only the factor of the candidate's enrollment as a voter but also, and more importantly, candidates' actual residency (at least for the past five years) in the constituency from which s/he is contesting and claiming representation. There are good reasons for this. Three could easily be identified.

Firstly, this will make representation what it really stands for. That is, it will become voter-centric and not voted-centric as it is now. Unless the MP is an actual resident of the constituency s/he represents, how will s/he be able to look into the well being of that constituency? Anyone claiming that a shuttle trip between the capital city and his/her constituency will suffice in this regard must be prepared to logically accept a New Yorker Bangladeshi representing Netrokona-1 (for instance) in the Parliament!

Secondly, and this is related to the first, it will put a stop to the reproduction of a Dhaka-centric National Parliament. It may be mentioned that Dhaka has been the regular place of residence for 35% of all candidates in both 1991 and 1996 elections. More interestingly, most of these candidates make trips to their respective constituencies just before the election! While this situation is bound to pull resources towards Dhaka to the detriment of the rest of the country, it provides grounds for 'intermediaries' (mostly men) and reproduce links between the candidate and his/her constituency. From the standpoint of representation, nothing can be more dangerous than this.

Lastly, it will put a stop to multiple candidatures (Article

71, Clause 2) and correspondingly, to the leader-centric organization of things. Indeed, it has become a common practice for some of the leaders, particularly of major political parties, to stand in the election from more than one constituency. While this is done apparently to guarantee the leader's victory at least from one constituency, it is also viewed with pride and a kind of recognition of the leader's position in the party as more than equal. Even after the leader's win from more than one constituency, representation, particularly of the abandoned constituencies (as per Article 71, Clause 1), is bound to suffer as a result of his/her multiple candidature. But then, this is part and parcel of the hero- or heroization of political parties.

Centralization or heroization of political parties gives rise to uncouth, semi-educated scyphants and drives away those who could possibly do the job much better without longing for any return favour. It is no wonder that in order to accommodate those who are least willing to become candidates but are otherwise required for running the government (technocrats, policy experts, etc.), there exists the provision of them becoming ministers, albeit restricted to one-tenth of the total number (Article 56, Clause 2). In fact, not all could join the scyphants and raise the slogan: 'neta tumi eglye cholo, amra acchhi tomar shathe' (leader you go ahead, we are all with you). Aside from catering to scyphancy, I have always found this slogan bordering on fascism, urging the cadres to follow the leader under all circumstances. But then, with the organization of scyphancy or fascism, the public goal of the voted representing the voter becomes a hoax.

There is, indeed, an intrinsic relationship between the number of voters, the role of intermediaries, including the power of the *masan*, in elections and the failure of the candidate to limit his/her election expenses. A quick calculation of the candidate's election expenses per voter will explain this.

Presently, the maximum limit of a candidate's election expenses is Taka 3 lakhs. If we take that on the average, as indicated earlier, one MP represents 189,056 voters then election expenses per voter stands out to be Taka 1.58 only. This is a dismal small sum well understood. In this context, critics, like FEMA, have recommended that the expenses be determined by the number of

voters' and that the expenses per voter be fixed at Taka 5.00 only. But then, is the matter so simple and could this be a solution? I am afraid the answer must be in the negative.

A quick calculation will show that Taka 5.00 per voter will raise the maximum limit of election expenses to merely Taka 9.4 lakhs (albeit based on the average representation figure - one MP representing 189,056 voters). But this falls far short from what is being spent now, in fact, even less than the one that we had come to know from a candidate in Comilla, in whose case per voter expenses on the average stands out to be Taka 15.86 only. It may be pointed out here that the Comilla candidate's expenses is at the lower rung, some go on to spend more than Taka one crore (that is, 10 million or 100 lakhs)!

It is clear, therefore, that raising the maximum limit of election expenses per voter to Taka 5.00 will simply not do. Any such law will be flouted again. In fact, I do not see the resolution of the problem by way of raising the maximum limit of election expenses. What one requires here is a clear understanding of two critical things, including the will to appreciate and face them squarely and rationally. Both were mentioned earlier.

**Engineering of Elections**

(Between the voter and the voted fall the shadow)

The power of the government is also true in elections. This is also true in the case of President's appointment of the members of the Election Commission, including the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC). While Article 118, Clause 1 provides the President with the task of appointing the above, this cannot be carried out by flouting or bypassing the provisions laid down by Article 48, Clause 3. The latter clearly states that:

In the exercise of all his functions, save only that of appointing the Prime Minister pursuant to clause (3) of article 56 and the Chief Justice pursuant to clause (1) of article 95, the President shall act in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister (emphasis mine).

Put differently, what it implies is that the Election Commission, including all its members, must always remain in a state of relative powerlessness vis-à-vis the power of the ruling party or partisan government and this is true even when the CEC is

appointed, as is the case with the incumbent CEC, on the basis of a consensus of major political parties. In this context, it would hardly be a surprise if the CEC heeds to the suggestion of the partisan government, as alleged by many a critic, in dealing with the electoral demands of the opposition parties. I guess this issue could easily be resolved by way of *dismantling the government* in matters related to the Election Commission or for that matter, elections as a whole. There are good reasons for this.

Two particular machineries of the government - administration and police - will come to play a greater role in elections. The Non-party Caretaker Government or more precisely, the 'non-partisan cabinet', in order to conduct the national election must seek support from the administration and the police. The former, in so far as it is manned by Deputy Commissioners and Thana North Officers who become Returning Officers and Assistant Returning Officers respectively, conjoins formally and effectually the power of the government with electoral activities. The role of the police, particularly in the backdrop of its relationship with the administration, is no different either at the time of elections.

Critics' plea for *degovernmentalizing* the administration of elections, therefore, is no surprise. FEMA, for instance, has recommended the appointment of Sub Judges and Assistant Judges as Returning Officers and Assistant Returning Officers respectively. While this is a step in the right direction, it should not be viewed as an all-time panacea since Returning Officers and Assistant Returning Officers, like the police, are only a section of the 'intermediaries' standing between the voter and the voted that we had mentioned earlier. In this context, it can justifiably be argued that unless the relationship between the voter and the voted is more openly and innovatively restructured and reintegrated, the 'shadow' that hangs between them will continue to distort the electoral process and the result of the election.

1. *Inclusion of the left-outs as voters.* Economic or environmentally induced floating populations as well as Bangladeshis living abroad are to be enrolled as voters. Under a separate category of residency and given that they all will have an ID card and a number, they may vote in any of the constituencies in Bangladesh.

2. *Separate tally of female voting.* This is required not only for containing the practice of male voting on behalf of women but also for looking at the (quantifiable) development of women voting, mainly for the purpose of giving them in gender-sensitive electoral campaigns and women's empowerment.

3. *Increasing women's representation in the parliament.* There has been quite a debate, including some concrete suggestions, on this lately. If we go by the suggestion put forward by M.A. Jallil, a member of the Awami League Presidium, it is the ruling party that has taken the most conservative position on this issue. According to Jallil, 'women are still not ready for an increased representation,' and as such, the present 30 seats ought to be continued for 'another two terms.' Such conservatism, however, is not limited to the ruling party alone. FEMA also feels that the present reservation system should continue for another two terms, although it does advocate the need for enacting a law and 'making it compulsory for each political party to nominate 30% of its total candidates from amongst women at general election when the reserved seats shall not be in existence.' Communist Party of Bangladesh, on the other hand, suggested provisions for one female MP in every district, all directly elected. This would mean increasing the number of women seats to 64. Amongst the civil groups, including women rights groups, there has been a commonality in their demand and that is to increase the number of seats to 100.

What is, however, missing in all the suggestion and demand is the rationale for increasing (or even not increasing) the number of seats. Why must it continue for another 'two terms' and not one or four terms? Why must it be increased to '100' and not '10' or '50' or more than 100? The demand for 64 seats is interesting but then, why must 'one seat per district' or five or ten? In this context, it must be pointed out that the present 30 (and that again, reserved) seats is arbitrarily arrived at having no sound basis, not to mention also highly discriminatory. In a way, it implies that women are merely 10% of men!

Although I would support any kind of increase of women seats, be it 64 or 100, but then, if it is to be based on any solid ground, let that ground be the percentage of female population or female voters in the country.

4. *Civic campaigns for free and fair election.* Voter education is a must, and this ought to begin in schools. There

is also a great need for NGO participation in such activities, indeed, of the kind FEMA is doing. But for the sake of credibility, both of the elections and (for instance) FEMA's activities, there is a need for not one or two but many more FEMAs.

Equally important is the role of media, not only print but also audio and visual. This is particularly true for Bangladesh where radio and television are under government control and nakedly partisan. There is already now a demand that Bangladesh Radio and TV be made autonomous and independent. In this connection, I must stress that I see the demand as a non-starter. In fact, I would go all the way in saying that let the government or the ruling party use the existing radio and TV stations as they please. I have no problem with that. What is required instead is an honest demand for more and more private radio and TV stations, with political parties even having the option of running them.

5. *Adding to the candidate's qualification.* Aside from making a candidate's enrollment as a voter compulsory, it is important that the candidate's qualification includes at least five years of actual residency in the constituency from where s/he is competing.

6. *Mono constituency candidacy.* No person can stand from more than one constituency. This will not only put a stop to the prevailing leader-centric candidature system but also save the parliament from a situation where the candidate having lost the election in one constituency and therefore the moral authority to represent the people of one area manages to go to the parliament by winning in another constituency.

7. *Far as the voter's constituency is concerned, it only makes a mockery of democracy. Mono constituency candidacy will put a stop to such a thing for good.*

7. *Democratizing political party.* There must be proper elections, from lower to upper bodies, in each and every political party. Let these party elections be conducted by 'neutral persons' who are not members of the party. Taking cue from the recently established Indian practice let the Election Commission make such elections binding not only for renewing registration but also for participating in local and national elections of the country.

Moreover, let there be binding rules for all political parties regarding the number of years a card member can hold post within his/her party. In fact, the leadership must not be allowed to remain in office for more than two four years,

terms.

8. *Democratizing nomination.* It largely follows from the above reform. All candidates, including the party leader, must be democratically nominated. No person can be a candidate without being an active member of the party for at least five years. This would definitely put a stop to the much-decried practice of giving nomination to the newly retired bureaucrats and military personnel, including party hoppers. Needless to say, this would make both bureaucrats and military personnel less interested in partisan activities while in service.

9. *Registration of political parties.* All political parties must be registered with the Election Commission. At the same time, as FEMA has recommended, all political parties must submit an annual statement of accounts showing the receipts and expenditures duly audited by the competent auditors to the Election Commission. It may be mentioned that, given the current government-willful power-raising, this could come about by reforming the Election Commission first. More on this now.

10. *Degovernmentalizing the administration of election.* Several tasks are critical here. One is distancing the Election Commission from the power of the government. It may be mentioned that currently the Prime Minister's Office runs the Election Commission Secretariat. There is good reason to believe that this impedes the members of the Election Commission, including the CEC, from taking positions contrary to the government. For the sake of neutrality, a separate and independent Election Commission, with the power of raising its own funds and having its own recruitment policy, needs to be established.

A further degovernmentalization of the administration of election is required by way of entrusting the power of declaring election results to the Election Commission. It may be mentioned that currently such power is vested with the Returning Officer who, as we have mentioned earlier, is the District Commissioner and a government employee. That the latter is a contentious issue is well understood by the recom-

mendation that FEMA has put forward.

The responsibilities of the Returning Officer and the Assistant Returning Officer should be assigned to permanent officers of the Election Commission and in case of death of such officer, the District Judge shall be appointed as Returning Officer and Sub Judge or Assistant Judge as Assistant Returning Officer.

11. *Qualification of the CEC.* This needs to be outlined in a precise manner. Theoretically speaking, at the moment, any person can be made a CEC. Many have opined that the CEC be appointed, as has been the practice in the past, from the Judiciary. If the post of the Chief Adviser in the Care-taker Government can be specified before, there is no reason why this cannot be done with the CEC.

12. *Decentralizing the parliament.* Parliament needs to be decentralized. I have already mentioned problems with representation. Moreover, 330 MPs deciding the fate of more than 120 million people not only seems obnoxious but also makes them vulnerable to corruption, as accountability of the MPs becomes less transparent. The way out is to have several parliaments, with at least one at each of the six divisions. There may be a common structure for all parliaments, but joining all these divisional parliaments, but it will have lesser power compared to the divisional parliaments in question. There is no doubt that such parliaments, apart from making MPs more transparent and thereby more accountable, would mellow down the cause of regional, local and ethnic dissenters.

In order to begin this task, however, let the one-chamber Parliament be first made into two - Upper and Lower Houses. If other South Asian countries can have two Houses, I see no reason why Bangladesh would be legislated by just one.

Only a combination of creative thinking and bold action can change the current dismal state of electoral practices.

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The topic of our next issue is: **Domestic Workers.** Creative suggestions are invited from our esteemed readers. Please send your materials to: Imitiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Centre For Alternatives, Room No. 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-19, Ext. 4550; Fax: (8802) 836769; E-mail: imitiaz@bangla.net