

A new agenda for election monitoring

HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN

WITH elections in the air, the issue of election monitoring is getting renewed attention. And so it should. Though some of the clouds over election 2001 were dispelled by earlier pronouncements...

the quality of the electoral outcomes. This is a concern which cannot be over-emphasized as we approach the election milestone of 2001.

Changing Threats to Free and Fair Polls

The imageries of election threats on which the monitoring mission has come to be fashioned in Bangladesh are largely drawn from the experience of the 80s. Under the Ershad regime, subverting the electoral process was a brazen affair of poll rigging, ballot snatching and booth capture...

toring response? Any hiding here behind technical arguments like "our jurisdiction is limited to the booth area" can only make a mockery of the larger democratic goal of election monitoring.

A clever use of violence is one face of the new threats to free and fair polls. The other is the threat to the "level playing field" as it relates to political competition, in particular the space to recruit and maintain activists, mobilize and campaign.

alone innovate on effective ways of responding to the challenge.

An Agenda for 2001

The value of election monitoring cannot be taken as self-evident. It is a value which has to be earned and earned probably the hard way. In the run-up to election 2001, it is thus also the monitoring process which is under scrutiny.

A Multi-Focus Strategy: A preventive monitoring process cannot only be about observers. There is a need to monitor what the electorate is

a few sample areas. There is a need to develop and publicise a violence-proneness map of the constituencies. This may generate a deterrent value in itself; it will also assist security plans and the deployment of observers. There is a need to monitor election expenditures; this can assist the Election Commission to clamp down on money politics if it generates the will to do so.

Focussing on both big solutions and small solutions: Both big solutions and small solutions are necessary. If the big solution is a new security arrangement, the small solution is the ban on motor-cycles for a stipulated period prior to the

ers mainly focus on the booths. This strategy must change. The strategy for security arrangement must cover not just the booths but the whole area of the constituency. In particular in those parts where advance warnings have been received of possible violence. It is also important to advertise this change in security planning. Election observers too must have a two-track strategy, one booth-centric and the other over the wider area of the constituency.

A Test of Perseverance

Bangladesh has come a long way in its democratic and developmental journey. The idea of democracy and the quest of prosperity have found strong roots in the hearts and imagination of its citizenry. This, in many ways, is the best safeguard to take the nation further forward as we enter the final lap of the electoral race. But politics does matter and the importance of ensuring due process in Election 2001 cannot be over-emphasized.

The concern of the people is not this or that particular date for the election but it is rather the quality of the preparation for the election and the confidence with which they can exercise their choice free of any fear.

A real concern here is about the shortening of the duration of the caretaker government which can affect election preparation adversely. Election 2001 is too important for the democratic future of the country to be left to any such short-cuts.

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with election day and the focus was on the booths. Peaceful booths came to be equated with peaceful election. How true is such an equation today?

One of the democratic advances of the 90s has been that crude subversion of the electoral process through wholesale booth-capture, ballot-snatching and media coup as in the 80s are no longer politically feasible. This certainly has been a victory for the political process as a whole. However, while the earlier type of threats has diminished, newer types have emerged. The concern is no longer only about peaceful booths. It is rather about peace over the whole area of the constituency.

the ground reality for political contenders. A PPRC (Power and Participation Research Centre) study on the union elections of 1997 was quite revelatory of the importance of this new type of threat to free and fair polls: on the question of what the sampled electorate felt were the winning factors in the election, over half held links to the thana police and administration as critical to improving the chances of winning.

The partisan use of administration to alter the political "playing field" has thus become the other major new threat to free and fair polls. It is a threat which comes into play not just on election day but well before and this poses a wholly new challenge for monitoring the pre-election period. It is a threat which looms large notwithstanding the constitutional provision for a caretaker government enacted in 1996. Current monitoring thinking is yet to bring this into public focus let

perceiving to be the barriers to free and fair polls. There is a need to mount an information blitzkrieg on the actual details of election arrangements. An adequate security arrangement is absolutely crucial; indeed this was ranked as the number one step towards ensuring safe and fair election in the PPRC Pre-election Opinion Survey of 1996. A key concern is how complaints are dealt with. Election tribunals have been found greatly wanting in their actual performance. Tracking official responses to complaints will be important.

A Pre-Election Monitoring Component: The real monitoring challenge in 2001 lies in opening a pre-election front. There are several steps to consider here. A great deal of concerns have been expressed about the new voter list. In consultation with the Election Commission, civil society actors could immediately undertake a quality check on

election day (this was a 1996 innovation). The importance of the motor-cycle ban in this instance lay in the fact these were the preferred vehicles of those who were intent on spreading a sense of terror within intending voters. In many cases, actual big solutions such as doing away with money politics may not be forthcoming; the challenge will be in innovating small solutions such as the 1996 rule on permissible types of campaign posters. A useful general activity here will be to research the 1991 and 1996 election experiences for "best practice" examples.

Election day: Security for the whole constituency, not only for the booths: Voter intimidation has become cleverer. Peace in the booth-area and intimidation elsewhere is the new formula by which voter intimidation is pursued. This is possible because election observ-



Have a nice day Around the world

Doctors would do well to make more small talk with their patients during clinic visits, according to Ohio researchers. Their study found that people reported greater satisfaction with their visits if their practitioner chatted with them about topics unrelated to their health.

With the growth of managed care, doctors have had to see more and more patients during practice hours, and previous studies show that physicians are spending less time with each patient during a clinic visit, the researchers noted. Physicians may improve patients' overall health and can make them feel that the doctor has given them adequate time by simply talking about the weather, telling a joke, or invoking conversation about something other than the health of the patient, the researchers emphasized.



Small act big fact Water Bath for Colds

A hot water bath, if it can be taken without undue exposure, is recommended as it helps to relieve much of the congestion in the chest and nasal membranes. Hot packs or fomentation are excellent for treating chest and head colds.

Steam baths and hot foot baths are also beneficial - they stimulate perspiration. Steam inhalation will help relieve congestion of the nasal tissues. Steaming with hot water mixed with salt is beneficial for a sore throat.

Moves on the Comode/Potty You can use your time on the potty to build probably the most underdeveloped muscle in your leg: the tibialis anterior. Start with both feet flat on the floor (while sitting). Next, lift your toes as high as you can while pressing your heels into the floor. This builds a small muscle you'd never waste time working on the gym, but there's a real benefit: it helps protect your shins. Perform as many as possible until you're finished with other business.

ME peace: Let political prudence prevail

MOHAMMAD AMIAD HOSSAIN

IN a dramatic move the United States vetoed on 27 March the Security Council resolution to send UN observers to the Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The resolution was tabled by the Council's seven members of the Non-aligned Movement. Bangladesh's permanent representative to the UN Anwarul Karim Chowdhury acted as coordinator of the NAM caucus. As a result of Israeli army crackdown on the mere stone pelting Palestinians, about 370 of them have so far lost their lives in six months.

The already prevailing tense situation further heightened following Israel's note of warning of sending army into occupied areas in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Earlier Israeli helicopters also pounded bases of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's elite bodyguard unit. Instead of placing blame on Ariel Sharon for the state of violence in the region the Bush administration has been toeing his to place blame on Palestinians and their leader Yasser Arafat.

On 28 March the Arab Summit in Jordan backed the Palestinian cause and called for an international force to protect Palestinians while at the same breath the members of the Arab League voiced their 'dismay and rejection' of a United States veto at the Security Council, which blocked the formation of an international observer force. They also demanded trial of Israeli war criminals.

One redeeming feature of the Arab Summit is that of revival of a boycott of Israel by Arab countries. It warned the Israeli government of

the 'repercussions of its retreat from the foundation of the peace process as laid down in Madrid in 1991'.

From the veto exercised by the United States under President George W Bush, it can be rightly said that the United States should also be held responsible to share the blame of massacres of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It is a known fact that the incumbent Prime Minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon, who is a hawkish rightwing demagogue, was responsible for 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacres of Palestinians in Lebanon. Following a tripartite agreement PLO evacuated from Beirut in late August 1982, which led to an end of 12-week war. The Israeli invaders intensified their acts of genocide culminating in the brutal massacres of innocent men, women and children in two Palestinian camps, Sabra and Shatila, in West Beirut on 18 September 1982. It may be worth mentioning that Ariel Sharon had to resign as Defence Minister after the massacres.

Last year Ariel Sharon as the chairman of right wing political party Likud chose the month of September, which may or may not be a coincidence, for the provocative visit to a Muslim shrine in Jerusalem (28 September). Since then cycle of violence continued unabated in West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The incumbent American President George W Bush, however, is not as serious as his predecessor Bill Clinton to pursue peace effort. He had reportedly told the Israeli Premier Ariel Sharon in Washington on 19 March that 'our nation will not try to force peace, that we will facilitate peace and that we will work

... for peace.' But the veto by the United States on Security Council resolution speaks of a negative attitude towards peace in the region.

Israeli Premier's visit to Washington appears to be to apprise the American President of the present situation in Arab occupied territories from Israel's point of view. President Bush apparently listened to dictation given by Sharon to cast a veto in case a resolution was adopted by the Security Council to send UN observer force to the West Bank and Gaza Strip and not to invite Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian leader whom Sharon consider a terrorist.

Ariel Sharon had discussion with the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and advised (rather warned) him not to send any UN mission to the region. The way Ariel Sharon conducted himself reflects his 'big power chauvinistic attitude' as he spoke the language of weapon.

This corroborates the fact that late Syed Najmuddin Hashim, journalist turned diplomat-minister reportedly told the New York Times representative in New York "... there appears to be no sovereign government in Washington since all foreign policy decisions were clearly subject to veto by the Jewish lobby and Tel Aviv". These views were reflected in the writing of Paul Findlay, 'The American political process and the Middle East policy', which appeared in American Arab Affairs, 1986. The views still stand unaltered.

It is equally pity that Ariel Sharon has backed out from commitment to hold dialogue with PLO leader Yasser Arafat. In response to Yasser Arafat's congratulatory letter Ariel Sharon said that Israel would strive

to achieve peace and security on the basis of the principle of solving disputes in peaceful ways and in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 on condition of a complete end to act of terror.

In view of the present war like situation which is detrimental to peace PLO authority along with other radical Arab groups, which include Fatah and Hamas, should devise a formula to have negotiations with Israel's coalition government instead of continuing violence. This pressure tactics of the hard core Palestinians may lead them nowhere if the Gaza Strip and the West Bank is cut off as Israel did on 15 February last following the bus attack by a Palestinian driver in Tel Aviv, which killed seven Israeli soldiers. Israel is a militarily powerful state, stone pelting Palestinians should realise the gravity of the situation. Yet there is no other option for Israelis but to offer concessions to Palestinians to accommodate their legitimate rights. In the seminar on 28 January last in Davos sponsored by the World Economic Forum on 'peacekeeping to peace building', the present Foreign Minister Shimon Peres in Ariel Sharon's coalition government said, 'Israel was committed to ending bloodshed. No one of us would like to see Palestinians suffer. We would like to see Palestinians living in independence and prosperity'.

Despite all the impediments and threats and counter threats one could expect a way to viable Israeli-Palestinian coexistence if strong political prudence prevailed on both sides.

Seismic shift in US-India relations

HARUN UR RASHID

THE recent visit of India's Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh to Washington is highly significant in many ways. The Bush administration proposed military co-operation with India and India's Foreign Minister stated that the agreement with the US would be announced in New Delhi. The US Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff and India's Chief of Staff will undertake visits to New Delhi and Washington to set the pace of military co-operation between the two countries. The US Secretary of State General Colin Powell said "We keep moving this relationship in a very positive and powerful direction" with India.

This heralds a strategic shift of US-India relations. During the Bill Clinton administration there was a noticeable change of dynamics in bilateral relations with India. It appears that under the new US administration, the relations have reached a new height.

Gone are the days when India was considered a "thorn" by the US in its ideological fight with the former Soviet Union during the Cold War. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US appears to have no "evil empire" to fight. At the same time India's link with the Soviet Union's successor Russia suddenly became weak because Russia became embroiled with internal political and economic woes. India has adjusted its foreign policy to meet the new world order.

India is admittedly considered a regional power in Asia because of its size, population and natural resources and with its democratic traditions the country has become the new "daring" of Asia to the US in the 90s. The US is keen to consolidate and strengthen its relations with India to keep its economic and

security interests strong in Asia. Under the Bush administration, one of the declared primary interests appears to be the need to build democracy in developing countries and India appears to play a model role for this purpose.

Furthermore under the Bush administration, India's strategic importance has gained weight. It is being considered as a counterpoint to China's power. The Bush administration has made it clear that US needs to "contain" and not "engage" China in Asia Pacific. The new administration wants to strengthen its relations with Japan, Taiwan and South Korea in the Far East and India

in South Asia. It appears that this rivalry is being canvassed by the security advisers of President Bush to contain the ambition of China to be the number one power in the Asia Pacific.

The diplomatic stand off in respect of the US spy plane in China demonstrates US's strategic vulnerability in the Asia Pacific. Given the perceived security threat to the US by China in Asia, the US needs India both in terms of economic and strategic reasons. Sino-Indian relations since 1962 war have remained cool, despite their efforts to normalise their relations. The irritants between India and China are primarily the Dalai Lama's refuge in India, border dispute on the Himalayas and

after all a land-locked state and if Pakistan chooses to cut off the transit route through its territory, the Taliban administration is likely to collapse economically. Furthermore it is alleged that the Taliban have been behind the Islamic militants who have been waging civil war in Tajikistan, Kirghizstan, Chechnya as well as in Kashmir. Afghanistan's Taliban has provided refuge to Osama Bin Laden, the number one terrorist in the eyes of the US. Both India and the US have a common strategy to contain exporting of alleged terrorists from Afghanistan.

Besides the strategic and security interests the US has been keen to promote its commercial and trade opportunities in India. India has opened its economy since 1991 and the US companies see a potential huge market in India with 300 million people of middle class who have disposal income to spend on Western manufactured consumer goods.

To conclude, many security experts claim that the military co-operation between the US and India will not go unnoticed by China and Pakistan. A new alliance is likely to emerge between China and Pakistan to contain the shift in US-India relations. Iran may also join in to contain the influence of the US in Asia.

sanctions on Pakistan once it was aware that Pakistan was determined to manufacture nuclear weapons. The US failed to persuade Pakistan to assume "the high moral ground" not matching India's nuclear tests. Pakistan's military coup in October 1999 cannot be vindicated in the international community in the 90s. Furthermore the Islamic extremists seem to have acquired a strong base in Pakistan. The fact that Pakistan has been one of the three countries (the other two being UAE and Saudi Arabia) which recognised the Taliban administration in Afghanistan appears to have annoyed the West, Russia and its neighbours Iran and India. Pakistan appears to be propping up the Taliban regime as Afghanistan is

interview had been granted and it was then ultimately refused. He managed, however, after a great deal of waste of time to see the Principal Staff Officer, General Pirzada, but the government apparently failed to pursue the matter. We are not of course suggesting that the message that the secretary had brought was so certain of yielding fruitful results that the failure to respond to it is the sole or even an important cause in the attitude which India later took nor are we suggesting that negotiations with the Awami Leaguers or with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would necessarily have resulted in a happy settlement. We do, however, consider it remarkable that instead of feeling a strong sense of urgency in the pursuit of a solution, the government adopted a lackadaisical attitude which we can contemplate now

only with profound dismay. In the meantime, the President announced that bye-elections would be held for the seats vacated by such of the MNAs in East Pakistan as had not been cleared. These were in fact held and it is now admitted on all hands that they were nothing short of farce. It was thought that campaigning would be a difficult matter and it would be best that parties should agree upon a division of the seats between the selves and in respect of each constituency one party should put up a candidate who returned unopposed. To dignify such arrangements by the name of elections seem to us ridiculous. Even so the parties were unable to agree between themselves and quite often Gen Farman Ali arbitrated between the parties and virtually nominated the candidates.

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by Jim Davis

Excerpts from the 'declassified' main report of Hamoodur Rahman Commission POLITICAL BACKGROUND-XXIII

THERE were, besides, other possibilities also of negotiating with the East Pakistani political leaders. For instance, contacts had been established through one of our embassies abroad with Awami Leaguers but nothing came out of this meeting and we are left with the impression that no keen desire was shown by the government here to enter into any such negotiation. We have also been told of the possibility which seemed to open up of a direct talk with India also whose hand in the rebellion or insurrection, if it may be so called in East Pakistan, by now hardly admitted of concealment and whose future intention of interfering more openly was or at least should have been clearly anticipated. At an international conference one of the secretaries to government was the

leader of the Pakistan delegation and there he met the leader of the Indian delegation who was of the rank of a Cabinet Minister. Despite the disparity in rank, however, the Minister approached the Secretary and indicated India's willingness to talk over things. On his return to Pakistan the secretary attempted as was his duty to communicate this to General Yahya. Such was the organization of the government at that time, however, that the secretary had no direct access to the President, although we should have thought that in a government which had no ministers, the secretary, as head of a ministry, should not have found any difficulty in obtaining admission to the President's presence. We are told that weeks passed before he had any intimation as to whether or not his request for an