

For a fool-proof voters' list

Cooperation at the grassroots imperative

THE electoral roll having been printed, the Election Commission is preparing to send it out to the Union Parishads for public display and scrutiny of the same at that end with an eye to incorporating changes where necessary. The UPs being at the grassroots of the various parliamentary constituencies it is at this micro-level that a most focused cross-checking can take place between the voters on the ground and those who appear on the list.

In this context, we urge the media, both electronic and print, NGOs, local functionaries of political parties, union parishad representatives and government officials not to leave anything to chance about a fool-proof voters' list. The primary need here is to bring the rural people out of home to take a good look at the list by way of sensitising them about their right to franchise based on a sure foundation that they have been registered as voters in the first place.

This is especially important in view of the sheer size of the electorate which is said to have reached the seven and a half crore mark. On top of this, a 32 per cent leap has been recorded in the number of voters over the level registered only four years ago. There are allegations also from the Opposition that in certain constituencies where ruling party stalwarts are to contest in the elections, the rise in the voters' number has been exceptionally higher. All these misgivings have to be removed and there is time for it, too; only that it will have to be optimally utilised by all concerned with an all round positive attitude to the exercise.

Since the credibility of the elections critically hinges on the availability of an accurate and reliable voters' roll there is no substitute whatsoever for maximum vigil to be maintained for the sake of completing the task on a top priority basis.

Illegal electronic signs by DCC

Stop this glaring systems loss at once

A glaring example of 'systems loss' is literally staring at us from every nook and cranny of the capital. Dhaka City Corporation has allowed hundreds of commercial vendors to set up electronic signs alongside major roads and intersections, including 17 major roads that have been demarcated to remain advertisement free. Electronic billboards of all shapes and sizes have begun to dominate the horizon, sucking power from a system that is already stretched beyond its limit. Residents of Dhaka have been sweating it out, as load-shedding has hit large parts of the city, but the neon signs 'authorised' by the DCC have continued to sap energy.

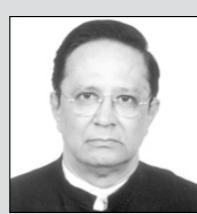
Adding insult to injury, DCC has been bypassing DESA's metering system. Central meters that are supposed to be installed by DESA for all new connections and electric poles, have been summarily dismantled. DESA's already depleted coffers have therefore been further plundered.

We are astonished by DCC's wilful defiance of city laws. The encroachments on the horizon are a source of visual pollution, eroding the aesthetic standards of the city, while in many instances, they impair the smooth flow of traffic. This state of affairs must end.

The DCC must remove illegal billboards and its electronic signs and must also conform to DESA's metering checks. DCC must clarify why it is allowing commercial vendors to charge advertisement rates as high as Tk 4,000 per square foot in some locations, when the official fee is a flat rate of Tk 30 per square foot? Who is benefiting from these hiked rates? It is certainly not the city coffers, nor the common person.

DCC's performance over the years has left much to be desired. This latest example of giving electronic signs a free run of the public space can only add to a damaged track record. Negligence in duties and abuse of power have now reached new heights.

Hunt for black money peters out: Some suggestions for a turn-around



S H IMAM

paltry ten per cent tax offer to validate their questionable incomes the honest businessmen at the very top of the income order are hard done by having to pay 25 per cent as income tax upfront.

The questions of unethicity and reverse discrimination apart, two other serious implications could be read into the shortsighted move: first, the possessors of illegal money elated over being unduly incentivised might have thought

intended by the government.

It can be argued that if attractive terms were not offered to the black money owners they would not be enthused to make a news of it any way. But this truncated incentive is too fragile a device to do any good in the face of a huge accumulation of unearned incomes over the long haul.

Pakistan tried it out even under military rule but could barely nibble at the fringes of the mountain of ill-

failure, broadly speaking. It is also clearly reflective of a certain diffidence to face up to the root causes behind the proliferation of black money and the various elusive and deceptive forms it takes on.

First of all, it must be recognised that black money lives off its own fat, is incremental and self-perpetuating. It can buy immunity of all sorts, earn gratitude of political parties by chipping in contributions and, above all, wield economic

roost as the money elite beats retreat. These can be a powerful antidote to the lust for illegal money.

Working from the roots upwards, it is financial corruption then that will have to be stymied through institutional safeguards. The major problem areas are: loan defaults, under-invoicing, over-invoicing, contractual cuts and commissions, tender monopsonisation, graft, extortion, rent-seeking, so on and so forth.

Money is stashed away into foreign festation; on the contrary, we have to get to the heart of the problem and address it there.

The cacophony of reform agenda sometimes makes it difficult for us to concentrate on what really needs to be done to contain financial corruption.

This is a recital of three suggestions which are close to the heart of the civil society but seldom internalised by those who need to do so for appropriate action on them. We need an independent anti-corruption commission detached from the chief executive's office and fully empowered to deal with corruption at high and low places. The CBI in India gets court order to investigate the conduct of the high and mighty coming under clouds from time to time. The US has an appropriate federal agency to do so. The Ombudsman's office has to be set up with wide terms of reference to touch-base on popular impressions about people and places. Last but not least, our auditing practices need to be brought at par with the international standards as part of an overall exercise to establish transparency across the system.

JUST ANOTHER VIEW

We cannot hope to deal with black money from a position of weakness. Nor do we begin from the assumption that it can at all be tackled at the outer rim of its manifestation; on the contrary, we have to get to the heart of the problem and address it there.

they would be pampered again if they did not come out in the open this time. So, what was the hurry!

Secondly, and more importantly, perhaps, the genuine tax payers in the high income bracket might have demurred that honesty did not pay, so why stick with it? In other words, unearned incomes seem to have been given a shot in the arm, although this was not certainly

gotten wealth. India too has experimented with various measures to mop up such money but to little avail on the whole. Of course, it is another matter that if the countries in the region had not tried out anything at all they would have drawn a blank, which however, is consolably not the case. Nevertheless, to settle for something-is-better-than-nothing kind of result is an admission of

power from behind.

The problem with such money is that it changes hands as quickly as its original complexion is altered through demonetisation in the form of physical assets and precious metal acquisitions.

At the policy level we need a steadfast commitment to distributive justice a return to a value system where the culture elite rule the

banks and some of it is spent to splurge abroad.

When corruption strikes off two percentage points from the potential GDP growth rate the sense of loss is stupendous, indeed.

So, we cannot hope to deal with black money from a position of weakness. Nor do we begin from the assumption that it can at all be tackled at the outer rim of its mani-

Indian polls : West Bengal defies anti-incumbency wave



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

MATTERS AROUND US

The showing has been encouraging for Congress and its chief Sonia Gandhi... This has come as a shot in the arms of the opposition parties like the Congress, AIDMK and of course the West Bengal leftists. BJP, however, had no big hopes from this voting but still it has enough reasons to be unhappy over the outcome.

won.

The outcome of the balloting causes no immediate impact on the multi-party national democratic alliance (NDA) government at the centre since the combine enjoys an unassailable majority in the lower house of federal parliament (Lok Sabha). But this may bode ill for the government in the sense that the results may encourage smaller allies in the ruling alliance to distance or disassociate themselves from main party (BJP) in the future and in such an event Vajpayee administration may find itself on slippery ground stacking survival. However, such a possibility looks remote at this stage since no ally has indicated to withdraw support from the government which has just completed 19 months of the five-year term. India has witnessed enough midterm polls in recent times and few would be encouraged to watch another in the immediate future. As such, smaller allies, alert of the situation that their withdrawal of support to the Vajpayee authority may spark off a crisis in the government triggering the likelihood of its collapse, are unlikely to go for such a course which would bring no benefit for them either. As such the ruling combine may remain firm in the saddle but there is no denying the fact that the popularity of BJP and its allies is on the wane and this has been reflected in the state assembly elections.

True, BJP is not a force to reckon with in any of the states that had gone to polls but the party did take part in the elections whereas its allies like the DMK in the Tamil Nadu and Assam Ganaparishad were in power. The BJP has drawn a blank in some states while its allies have cut a sorry figure. In Tamil Nadu the defeat for the DMK is simply total as the AIDMK romped home with more than two third majority. This may send a signal to the allies of BJP in other states like the TDP in Andhra

Pradesh, which is in power there, about the dangers of remaining allied with the BJP. Evidently, the BJP-led federal government suffered setbacks in public eye after the sensational disclosures made by "Tehelka" dot com on the corruption involving higher echelons of the government and ruling combine politicians. The chief of the BJP Bangaru Laxman and defence minister George Fernandes were among those who had to quit following almost incontrovertible evidences relating to the scam in purchase of sensitive defence ministry equipment. The opposition demanded resignation of the government after the disclosures but Vajpayee refused to quit and doubted the veracity of the accusations. The government set up an enquiry headed by a retired supreme court judge but Congress and other opposition are keeping the anti-administration pot boiling asking the administration to quit. The "Tehelka" allegations and the anti-incumbency factors helped the opposition parties win polls in Tamil Nadu and Assam while the leftists, although a bitter critic of the BJP, lost power in the Kerala, the state which has never returned any party or combine to power for more than one term. Congress which grouped with Muslim League and some other parties made it a resounding victory.

West Bengal, the citadel of leftists in India, survived the anti-incumbency onslaught as the CPM-led ruling Left Front extended its rule in the state by another five years beyond 23 years which is a record since communists nowhere in the multi-party democracy could cling to power for a such long time. It was possible because the leftists retained their influence in the overwhelming rural areas while the challenge from the "Trinamul Congress"-led alliance was only felt in the urban areas. Mamata Banerjee, the so called firebrand leader of the Trinamul allied with the Congress with which she broke away several

years ago but the new grouping simply failed to dislodge the communists from power. One of the factors for this outcome is the failure of this combine to attract the minority Muslims who constitute about 20 per cent of the voters in the state. Mamata earlier allied with the BJP, widely seen by many as communal and lost the minority votes. This time hopes were raised regarding minority votes after she allied with secular Congress but the purpose was not served as Muslims largely preferred to remain with the leftists. Also the alliance with Congress came very late and could make little impact. Besides, there were commotions in

both Trinamul and Congress over the new alliance and both the parties suffered internally due to this development.

Mamata's key associate former state minister for foreign affairs Ajit Panja did not approve alliance with Congress and had predicted that this would not pay electoral dividends. Mamata is clearly a frustrated leader now. She pulled out of the "Tehelka" disclosures but could not fulfil her cherished goal of becoming the chief minister in the state which she considers as ruined by the leftists. People gave a thumping mandate again to the elderly leader

and former chief minister Jyoti Basu and his successor Budhadev Bhattacharya. Communists have many failures but proved to be sincere to the causes of masses in West Bengal. Mamata, known for her simple life and fiery anti-left oratory, could not go too far. May be she has still to go a long way to reach the citadel of power. However, age is still in her favour and she can wait.

The showing has been encouraging for Congress and its chief Sonia Gandhi who will now be emboldened for a more active opposition role in the country with an eye to power in the future. This has come as a shot in the arms of the opposition parties like the Congress, AIDMK and of course the West Bengal leftists. BJP, however, had no big hopes from this voting but still it has enough reasons to be unhappy over the outcome.

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.



Damaging the river

THE BANKS OF THE RIVER BURIGANGA ARE EXPLOITED FOR A WIDE RANGE OF COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES. THESE TIMBER BOATS AT IMAMGANJ ARE OFFLOADING AND TAKING CARGO IN A PLACE THAT SHOULD BE PROTECTED ENVIRONMENTALLY AND FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE COMMON PERSON. BUT COMMERCIAL WASTE AND HUMAN REFUSE ARE RUINING THESE PRECIOUS RIVER BANKS. ONCE AGAIN, AS WE HAVE IN THE PAST, WE APPEAL TO THE CONCERNED MINISTRIES TO PROTECT OUR RIVERS FROM COMMERCIAL AND HUMAN DEGRADATION.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Be reader friendly

Compared to the printing and letter-size of other English dailies like *Bangladesh Observer* and *Weekly Holiday*, *The Daily Star*'s indistinct printing, because of using light ink and small-size letters render the reading a bit uncomfortable and create strain on the reader's eyes.

The printing quality and size of letters of the *Weekly Time (International)* and *News Week* are such that these can be read with much ease and comfort. Is it impossible to improve the quality of printing, using a little darker ink, and enlarge the size of letters?

The Daily Star's performance over the years has left much to be desired. This latest example of giving electronic signs a free run of the public space can only add to a damaged track record. Negligence in duties and abuse of power have now reached new heights.

article reproduced in *The Daily Star* incorporating therein the aforesaid information.

Ghiasuddin Ahmed
Sylhet

Reduce weekly holiday

The president's support for reducing the current two-day weekly holiday is most encouraging.

Five working days in a week is a luxury we cannot afford. We have to keep in tune with the global village concept, due to revolutionary changes brought about by the IT revolution. Our export market is not diversifying fast enough, and the largest foreign exchange earners, the garment industry, facing international obstacles. We have to be practical rather than sentimental, and provide opportunities to the new generation to compete at an international pace.

One day or one and a half days' weekly holiday should not be opposed, but two-day weekly holiday, cannot be supported. We have made greater sacrifices for the country, so why get obstinate with a

low-key administrative issue?

A Bangladeshi
Dhaka

Risky road

The link-road between Madhubagh, Kanchabagar and Mirbagh crossing has turned almost into a death-trap. The road is so narrow that two small vehicles cannot pass freely. Manholes with open mouths wait for the pedestrians. During the rainy season, the road goes under water, increasing the chance of serious accidents.

But nobody seems to care about this deplorable state. Would the authorities concerned take immediate steps to reconstruct the road?

Md Ahmadul Haq (Topu)
Zia Hall, DU

Political aphorisms

When politicians are engaged too much with politics, the dynamism of politics suffers and the public service aspect of politics becomes eroded.

There is a severe communication gap between the political leaders and their workers. The leaders say

one thing, the workers do something else. This confuses the voters and the image of the leader suffers.

The senior civil servants are very keen to become politicians; but not vice versa; although the politicians like to be very close to the bureaucrats, for reasons not very clear to the electorate. There are no public debates to ensure transparency.

The civil service is neither civil, nor does it provide the required service.

According to the findings of Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), less corruption on a mass scale could have raised Bangladesh's GDP annual growth rate by two per cent (Tk 56 billion). The police and the civil service lead in corruption.

What is the balance-sheet for and against the current trend in political culture? How have the politicians benefited society?

A Mawaz
Dhaka

Time to face the tide

The general elections are near, and the major political parties have started hitting the campaign trail armed with their decade old rhetoric

and lies. But to an objective citizen, one thing is crystal clear, politics in our country is all about 'making money'.

Our corrupt politicians have no intention to represent the people. They are in the business of carrying out personal vendettas and amassing illegal wealth at the expense of our fragile democratic values. In a civilised(?) society, how could known criminals, loan defaulters and visionless politicians get elected and receive patronage from the highest echelons of the government or major political parties? The term 'government' is a misnomer for Bangladesh; we have only had 'regimes' either in the form of a fascist party or military backed rulers to govern this poor country of ours.

After the 1991 mass upsurge, we expected a change. But it was wishful thinking. The deterioration of core democratic values is so fast that we don't have the time to react. Lies and deceit has become the mainstay of our political arena.

The relief lies within us. We have to stop being lied to and abused by these self-serving 'leaders'. The time has come to stand against the tide and shore up courage to weed out these politicians, destroying our nation.

The media can play a tremendous role in gathering support and creating awareness among the masses against these petty politicians.

Prime example is the "Terrorist Mamun" case in Chittagong where the pen proved mightier than the sword.

It is true that many editorials have been written over the time, with no effect. But we should not be disheartened, rather join in a concerted effort to get rid of these parasites. Election year makes a tremendous impact on the people's psyche; let us use this opportunity to shed the spotlight on "those who could make a difference".

K. Rafiq
Chittagong, on e-mail

Indifferent government

We are relieved to learn the opposition political parties have declared that in their ongoing agitation programme they are considering not to call hartal and instead would prefer road march, demonstrations, rally etc. Though hartal is a democratic right, too much of it is self-defeating.

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