

TOWARDS THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION



Why this special issue?

With two years to go before the next election we decided to bring out this supplement with the specific purpose of generating an informed debate on the flaws in our electoral and political system and what can be done about them to strengthen our democracy. In the following pages we have brought together some of the best thinkers and analysts in the country so that a public debate can be initiated and creative ideas for solving these problems can be found from the public in general and the Star readers in particular.

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How could we serve our readers best on this auspicious occasion of our 14th anniversary? To answer that question we asked ourselves another question, what is the most crucial event in the near future that is likely to have the most profound impact on our democratic future. The unanimous answer was the election of 2006/7. We also came to the conclusion that to ensure that the coming election truly strengthens our democracy we need to undertake serious reform of our political and electoral systems. We dedicate this special issue to make that election truly representative of our PEOPLE'S WILL.

Democracy, however flawed and inadequate, is still independent Bangladesh's biggest achievement. But regrettably, instead of strengthening it over the years, instead of building new institutions that could nurture it further and instead of consolidating the existing bodies-like the Election Commission, that are integral parts of democracy, we have allowed them to erode relentlessly to the extent that serious doubts have arisen in the minds of our people as to which direction

our democracy is moving in.

As we said the single-most important event to have a very significant impact on our democratic future is the coming election of 2006/7. Making that election free and fair will be the litmus test for our democracy and everything that such a political philosophy represents. We cannot emphasize enough how crucial the quality of that election will be for the future of our nascent democracy.

Since the restoration of democracy in 1991 we have had three elections that compare impressively well with those held in any other part of the developing world. Through them we have had an impressive assertion of the public will and peaceful changes of government. It was hoped that over time and through the holding of more such elections the institutional growth for a workable democracy would be advanced. That had not proved to be so.

Our democracy appears usurped by narrow partisan politics and the 'winner take all mentality' of election victors is turning the mandate to govern into license to oppress the opposition.

It, however, needs to be mentioned here that both BNP

and the AL are guilty of sowing the seed of public suspicion in the electoral process. Both of them are on record to have denounced an election as being fraudulent simply because they came out the loser in it. The AL having lost twice decried the results in 1991 and 2001 and the BNP did the same in 1996. Their attitude revealed to the public that as far as they are concerned that an election is only free and fair if they win it. Otherwise 'public will' has no value.

The fact that both our major political parties refuse to accept defeat has led to the suspicion that they would go to any length to win- including trying to manipulate it. This suspicion essentially led the AL to demand the introduction of caretaker administration that will take over the governance process of the country for three months to conduct a free and fair election. The AL's demand caught the public imagination. In the face of mass support, especially after showing its hand in the rigged election of February '96, the BNP was forced to amend the Constitution and incorporate the caretaker system in our electoral process.

The matter should have

ended there. Though the BNP rejected the election verdict of '96 and claimed that victory was snatched away from them through unfair means, it accepted its outcome and did not question the caretaker system itself nor did it ask for any change in it. However the AL's reaction to the 2001 election results was to question the neutrality of the caretaker government, the election commission, the armed forces and the President himself, leading to the demand for a reform in the caretaker system.

Fourteen years after the restoration of democracy following the toppling, through mass movement, of the autocratic regime of Gen. Ershad, we are forced to admit that our democracy appears confined to holding elections and does not seem to influence, in any substantive way, our governance process. Serious doubts have also emerged in the process of holding the election itself.

Leaving aside the issue of changes in the caretaker system there are serious questions of reform in our political and electoral processes that we need to address. We have learnt through the experience of holding the last three general elections and the way the coun-

try has been run by the successive governments, that we need to change our political culture of confrontation. We also need to strengthen our election commission by giving it an independent secretariat, make our electoral rolls for authentic, make the election funding process transparent and accountable, etc.

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We thank our readers for their magnificent support that has made us the largest, the most trusted and respected English language daily today. We hope you enjoy our humble effort and participate in a debate on these crucial issues by writing to us your views on them.