

Do we need a federal system of government? Why did Ahmadinejad win?

ABDUL QUADER writes from Canberra

BA NGLADESH has a unitary political system of government based in the capital Dhaka. The government is responsible for governing a country with a population of 140 million, and deals with a variety of subject matters from foreign affairs, defence, and border security to more mundane affairs such as agricultural and rural development, transport and communications, health and education, forestry and environment, social welfare, youth and women affairs, and what not. The responsibility of one elected government based in the capital appears to be at odds with providing so many services to so many. I believe it is time to think seriously as to whether the country needs more than one level of political government.

A federal system of government with a number of provincial governments may go a long way in improving the governance of the country. Given the ever-increasing size of population with accompanying pressures on the government, the first thing that is required is to correct the political environment around which everything else revolves. The current centralisation of power and decision-making authority within a unitary system of government appears to be out of step with the changing needs and demands of the people at large. This centralised system of government cannot keep pace with the changing social and economic circumstances in the country.

Provincial governments would be expected to serve the people better than a centralised government based in the capital with regard to the day to day needs of the people such as jobs, food, education, health, sanitation, environmental management, community welfare, security of person and property, etc. The closer the government to the people, the more responsible, transparent, and accountable the government would be. This in turn is likely to encourage the people to take an active part in the development and growth of the local areas.

A number of provincial governments, for instance, four in the greater administrative divisions (Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, and Khulna), along with a federal government at the centre can be expected to make a big difference to the lives of the people. A federal form of government distributes political power to different tiers of government according to a predetermined formula and can ensure "checks and balances" in relation to decisions and actions of governments.

Federalism could also be a possible solution to the unique problems faced by the ethnic, linguistic, or religious groups living in different regions in the country (e.g. Chakmas in the Hill Tracts). A federal system with a fair territorial distribution of political power can make a great contribution to dispelling fears of particular communities who often perceive themselves to be under the domination of others that care little for their distinctive values, cultures, or lifestyles.

One may argue that a federal system of government will lead to the creation of additional decision-making tiers, and may frustrate the very objectives underlying the system. Here lies the crux of the issue

A possible strategy to address major issues of national significance could be putting these issues to a thorough debate for all shades of opinion in society. After a comprehensive debate, and subject to a general agreement by the major players in politics, a referendum can be held, if necessary, to arrive at a clear decision concerning the development of key political and legal institutions underpinning how the country should be governed.

that poses a challenge for the politicians, development thinkers and practitioners, and the people in general. What kind of power distribution between the central government and the provincial governments do we envisage? If real autonomy is not vested in the provinces, and the provincial governments cannot make key political decisions concerning different social, economic and financial issues that confront people within their jurisdictions, then this would be expected to give rise to cumbersome and complicated decision-making processes.

It is obvious that a number of new provincial governments with a machinery of administration in each province will come out of a federal system. However, there will not be any relevance for the existing administrative structure in a new system. Since most of the development planning activities will need to be transferred to the provinces, the central planning agency, the Planning Commission in Dhaka, will cease its operation in its present form. Its role in national development planning will be greatly reduced and most of its current functions with associated physical, human and financial resources can be transferred to the provincial planning agencies.

Similarly many other ministries, departments, autonomous and semi-autonomous government agencies can be restructured in line with the distribution of political power and functions vested at each level of government, federal and provincial. This means that the number of departments and other government agencies in the capital Dhaka will be decreased and most of their resources, including human resources, could be transferred to the provinces for utilisation in provincial agencies. Moreover, there are

already branch offices of many departments at divisional and district levels.

The resource transfer and the existence of branch offices will greatly reduce the need for additional funding for the establishment of administrative machineries at provincial level. Moreover, a smaller government with a reduced administration at the centre will need less spending for its operation, thereby releasing funds that could finance expenditures at provincial level. This would be consistent with the restructuring of government functions where many policy-making and project planning and implementing activities will be located in the provinces. In addition, an appropriate taxing and revenue-sharing formula will have to be devised considering the scope of functions and responsibilities at each level of government.

Since many problems will be tackled at provincial level, the central or federal government in the capital will have the opportunity to focus its attention to areas needing national level intervention. This also includes effective policy coordination between the federal and provincial governments to bring about the greatest possible impact on the outcomes of government policy decisions and program implementation on the basis of the principle of co-operative federalism.

A major challenge for the central government would be to ensure that national interest is served by all levels of government, including itself. One of the functions of the central government compatible with serving national interest could be, for instance, to look at regional economic disparity, including disparity between the urban and rural facilities and infrastructures, and to take appropriate measures to reduce this disparity as far as possible.

A pertinent aspect of the federal system of government is the structure of local governments. Local governments are not the "arms and legs" of higher levels of government, rather they are "government" in their own right. It is, therefore, necessary to place local governments in proper perspective so that they can effectively function to meet local needs without being unnecessarily dependent upon a higher level of government. The spirit of Article 9 of the Bangladesh Constitution providing for the promotion of local government institutions should be put into practice in order to allow different tiers of local government to carry out their functions in line with the autonomy they expect to exercise.

Moreover, the political and social interaction between the politicians and the people can be enhanced and improved in a system of decentralised political system. This could also act as a "check and balance" concerning the use of discretionary power by the government provided the rule of law is allowed to operate without hindrance. Coupled with the development and operation of appropriate political and social institutions, decentralisation of power and devolution of administrative authority is expected to lead to greater benefits for greater number of people in a federal system of government.

Bangladesh has experienced relatively strong economic performance in the past decade, with an average annual GDP growth of 5 per cent. The country has made remarkable progress in some areas, including health, education, empowerment of women and poverty reduction, and has virtually achieved self-sufficiency in food due to agricultural development. The rate of population growth has declined to 1.4 per cent, which can be described as a commendable achievement compared to

some other developing countries, including Pakistan.

But according to the World Bank: "Bangladesh has made great strides in improving lives of its people since gaining independence in 1971, yet it remains one of the poorest countries in the world. Its progress over the past two decades is evidence of a great potential that is still far from being realised." This implies that the country is still facing many challenges ahead to further improve the lives of its people through developing and implementing appropriate policies and development programs.

The key challenges include institutional capacity building and good governance which can do away with the underlying weaknesses in the way the country is politically governed. A federal system of government can help in improving the macro political environment, thereby strengthening the decentralised system of governance. Significant and sustainable improvement in economic and social welfare is possible only in a society where the rule of law is the norm of governance because it does not allow the government to provide any special favour to anybody, which has the potential to minimise the scope of taking resort to nepotism and favouritism or other forms of corruption. Only policy, without the arbitrary use of discretion on the part of the executive, will guide the delivery of government services to the people in all walks of life.

Amendments to the constitution would be needed to establish a federal system of government in the country. Political thinkers, political parties and development practitioners and others concerned with the good governance of the country can give serious thought to this issue. In this context, we may recall some of the amendments to the constitution made in the past, such as the insertion of "Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim" under the Proclamations (Amendment) Order, 1977 and the inclusion of Islam as the state religion of the republic under the Article 2A, inserted by an Act of Parliament in 1988.

The general opinion about the two amendments mentioned above is that these amendments were politically motivated and had nothing to do with improving the governance of the country. The point I would like to make here is that any change to the constitution should be realistic and achievable, purporting to make a real difference to the lives of the people in the context of how the country should be governed overall. In my view, amendments to the constitution in order to establish a federal system are worth trying, provided we have some kind of a general consensus first.

A possible strategy to address major issues of national significance could be putting these issues to a thorough debate for all shades of opinion in society. After a comprehensive debate, and subject to a general agreement by the major players in politics, a referendum can be held, if necessary, to arrive at a clear decision concerning the development of key political and legal institutions underpinning how the country should be governed.

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HARUN UR RASHID

THE outcome of Iran's presidential election has surprised both inside and outside Iran. After eight years rule of reformist President Mohammad Khatami, the conservative Tehran mayor's win demonstrates the complex dynamics of Iranian politics.

Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (49) swept to a landslide win (62.2 per cent of the popular vote) in the run-off presidential election in Iran on June 24, defeating 71-year old former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. He takes over the office of the presidency next month.

Ahmadinejad is a civil engineer with a Ph.D degree (1986). Media reports indicate that Rafsanjani could not believe his defeat because on June 17, he led the first presidential poll against Ahmadinejad. He issued a statement, wishing the victor well and saying that he would not challenge the results, but lashed out at unnamed opponents who he said "spent millions to destroy my image and my family's image."

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is the "meteor" of Iranian politics. Within a couple of years, he has been elected as president, rising from provincial governor, vice-minister of culture and Islamic guidance, and mayor.

Why did Ahmadinejad win the election? There are many reasons and some of them deserve mention: First, Ahmadinejad advocated poverty elimination through subsidies and handouts as one of his principal slogans during the election campaign. His supporters have conducted a masterful election campaign that has shot straight to the heart of the oppressed. The oppressed includes ordinary workers, the poor and disaffected, and those sick of corruption and the class divide.

Although Iran is known to have the second largest oil reserves, its 70 million population are divided into three distinct classes: one third is poor, another one third constitutes lower and middle class, and the remaining one third is rich.

Iran's working class perceives little reward from Iran's oil assets, which earned huge money with spiraling oil prices. Ahmadinejad has captured the imagination of the first two groups, who voted for him. He is known to have a solid support base among religious conservatives. The combination of the support of the poor and the conservatives has worked wonders for him at the election.

The International Crisis Group representative in Tehran, Karim Sadajpour, reportedly said: "The imbalance between upper and lower classes was one of the issues the revolution (1979) was supposed to resolve. Twenty-six years later it is still there."

As former President Clinton once has said, the central issue at any election is "the economy, stupid!" The Iranian election could be compared to the 2004 Indian election in which poor voters had put the Congress in power, while BJP was

BOTTOM LINE

All eyes are fixed on the new president to see how he balances his conservative views with personal freedoms that have been already in place among young people. Already the president-elect promised to form a government of moderation, calming fears of reformists in the country and Western nations. He has assured that Iran would not abandon talks on its nuclear programme with the European Union, although he firmly believes in Iran's right to development of nuclear energy.



Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (49): A landslide win.

backed by elite voters who had mobile telephones and personal computers and cars.

Second, Ahmadinejad is known to be scrupulously honest in his personal life. He shuns affluent life style. He is seen as a person of integrity and lives in style that is no different from an ordinary Iranian. As the mayor of Tehran since 2003, he is known to have lived in a modest suburban style home, with sparse furniture. This was in sharp contrast to the life style of his predecessor, whose house had chandeliers hung from the high ceilings above marble floors. The house had a swimming pool, sauna, and gym.

Third, it is noted that the real power in the country lies in the hands of the spiritual leader. The president leads the government while major policies on domestic and foreign affairs rest with the spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Most Iranians have been disillusioned by the failure of outgoing President Mohammed Khatami in introducing further reforms. Many of his proposed reforms did not find favour with the spiritual leader. Therefore, whatever the candidate Rafsanjani promised for liberal reforms and privatisation and overtures with the US, voters knew that he would not be able to deliver them. Those promises seemed hollow to them.

Fourth, the President-elect is known to be fiercely loyal to the spiritual leader Ayatollah Khamenei. It is reported that the leader backed him during the election. Most voters thought that it was better to go with someone who would be able to deliver goods as promised because he had the support of the spiritual leader who had the final say in matters of state under the constitution.

Finally, the Bush administration did not help the reformist Khatami's regime. Although some European leaders considered President Khatami as "Iran's Gorbachev," the Bush administration listed Iran as one of the countries of the "axis of evil" with Iraq and North Korea. This

has undermined the government of Khatami and the reformers.

Anti-Iranian US stance has played straight into the hands of supporters of conservatives, and most Iranian people were alienated with the US, and it helped Ahmadinejad. Most voters thought it was better to vote for Ahmadinejad because his government would have the support of other agencies of the government, controlled by conservatives. At last, Iran's president is in the hands of the conservatives, and the presidency will work as "knife through butter" in harmony and unison with the spiritual leader.

The victory in 1997 of the outgoing reformist President Mohammed Khatami was due to a desire for social change. This election has been seen as catalyst for economic change that will be instrumental in eradication of poverty and corruption in the country.

All eyes are fixed on the new president to see how he balances his conservative views with personal freedoms that have been already in place among young people. Already the president-elect promised to form a government of moderation, calming fears of reformists in the country and Western nations. He has assured that Iran would not abandon talks on its nuclear programme with the European Union, although he firmly believes in Iran's right to development of nuclear energy.

Iranian Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi said that it made "little difference" who became the country's president because he had little voice on policies. Ebadi was of the view that whatever limited reforms the Khatami regime had been able to introduce since 1997, President-elect Ahmadinejad would not interfere, because the country might turn towards civil war. That is not in the interest of the conservatives, and the country's stability is paramount in the face of growing unease of the Bush administration over its nuclear programme.

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Does a unitary political system of government serve us better?

Our strength is our diversity

Even after your cowardly attack, you will see that people from around the world will arrive in London to become Londoners ... whatever you do, however many you kill, you will fail.

KEN LIVINGSTONE

THREE months ago Newsweek published a survey of global cities with London on its cover. But no one could have foreseen the intensity of experience and emotions London lived through during the first two weeks of July. Consider: on July 2, London hosted Live 8, watched by hundreds of millions worldwide. On July 6, London won the right to stage the 2012 Olympics. Less than 24 hours later, the city was rocked by bombs murdering and maiming without regard to race, religion, age or occupation. Last week Britons (and many others) marked the tragedy with a moment of silence. It's no hyperbole to say that, for Londoners, this has been the most intense time since World War II.

As then, the underlying character of the city has come out. And to begin, let me introduce someone I have never met but who understands London perfectly. Marie Fatayi-Williams is a Muslim who flew to London from Nigeria because her son Anthony was missing. Before receiving confirmation that he was killed in the explosion on a London bus, she held an impromptu street-side press conference. "Anthony is a Nigerian born in London, who worked in London. He is a world citizen. Here today we have Christians, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, and Hindus, united in love for Anthony."

Among those killed or missing were Poles, Turks, Americans, French, Italians, Israelis, Iranians, Sri Lankans, and British of many ethnic origins. Religions included Christians, Muslims, Jews, and others I do not know. One commentator said London had become the world's first "postnational city" an exaggeration but with an important element of truth. Another, in words I would never have chosen but with the brashness of the British tabloid press, wrote that the bombings would go down as an "equal-opportunity massacre." Or, as the city's slogan has it, "One city, one world." That's very much the sentiment that produced Live 8 and led to London's winning its bid for the Olympic Games showing not only London's historic monuments, but also featuring South African, Chinese and Russian children developing into athletes. And it's the essence of London's response to the recent terrorist attack.

That essence might be summed up as the resilience of cosmopolitanism. For centuries, London was the world's greatest port. Throughout history, it has had more physical connections with the rest of the globe than any other place on the planet. Shakespeare may have been born in Stratford but he worked in London, and his paying

audience made their living by trade. Three hundred years ago a quarter of those invited to the coronation of George II were foreigners living in London.

Around this nucleus developed the world's greatest international financial centre. New York handles a greater volume of financial transactions, but that reflects above all the size of the US domestic market. As a strictly international centre, London exceeds even New York. More than a million Londoners work in the City. Its international place is demonstrated by the fact that economic trends in East Asia often have more effect on it than developments at home in the UK.

Of course, with all this come people of every ethnic stripe and nationality. London's exposure to innumerable cultures fuels its creative industries, from entertainment, architecture and media to music, design and advertising. A quarter of London's senior- and middle-level financial management comes from abroad. Nearly a million Londoners are of Asian origin. One third of Londoners are now from ethnic minorities. Perhaps only a fraction of London's citizens fully appreciate its position as a great world financial and business centre. But polls show almost all enjoy the city's extraordinary multinational and multiethnic character.

I can only end as I did in Singapore, where I first heard the news of what had happened in London. I will use the same words I addressed to those who came to kill us:

I know that you personally do not fear giving up your own life in order to take others. That is why you are so dangerous. But I know you fear that you may fail in your objective to destroy our free society, and I can show you why you will fail.

In the days that follow, look at our airports, look at our seaports and look at our railway stations. Even after your cowardly attack, you will see that people from around the world will arrive in London to become Londoners and to fulfill their dreams and achieve their potential. They come, as so many have come before, because they choose to be free, to be able to be themselves. They flee you because you tell them how they should live. They don't want that. And nothing you do, however many of us you kill, will stop that flight to our city where freedom is strong and where people can live in harmony. Thus whatever you do, however many you kill, you will fail.

Ken Livingstone is Mayor of London. © 2005, Newsweek Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.

London bombings, violence and Islam

ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

BOMBING in central London in the morning of 7th July caused terrible loss of lives and injuries to several hundreds of people. Though stated by none it seems to be in retaliation for Blair government's participation along with the Bush government in Afghan and Iraq wars and havoc caused in these countries by the US-UK and allied forces. In these countries too large number of civilian lives were lost and thousands injured.

In Madrid, Spain also several hundred people were killed sometime ago and immediately after the train bombing in Madrid the Socialist government of Spain announced withdrawal of forces from Iraq. In Iraq too, suicide bombings take place practically everyday and hundreds of innocent people are being killed since USA invaded the country.

In India too on several occasions some elements have resorted to suicide bombing or have carried out attacks latest being in Ayodhya on make shift Ram Mandir. All the extremists were killed in that operation. Most of these operations are carried out by well-educated youth. It has been pointed out even by many intelligence agencies that these youths are not the product of madrasas as generally assumed. They are university graduates or trained medical professionals.

Why do they resort to such operations in which, more often than not, they lose their lives in the prime of their youth? Is it because of their religious fanaticism? Can such operations be explained as mere acts of religious fanaticism? I think not. No psychologist will agree with such oversimplified explanation.

It is in fact very complex phenomenon and number of factors will have to be taken into account. Every human being reacts emotionally, including the most educated, to certain major events involving national and international proportions. Such reactions find different levels of expression from condemnation to moral indignation to violent acts of retaliation. Also, a sense of helplessness can result in acts of senseless retaliatory violence. When one cannot punish the real culprits one begins to strike at innocent people of that nation or community.

The US and UK forces are too mighty for these youth belonging to organisations like Al-Qaeda or Lashkar-e-Tayyiba or similar other organisations to take on frontally. And throughout history we have several instances of hit and run tactics followed by those who cannot fight frontally with the forces they are pitted against. It

is also to be borne in mind that modern weapons are highly destructive and can kill hundreds or thousands at a time. America dropped atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and killed more than 200,000 people at a time.

The terrorists also use highly destructive weapons manufactured by the west and smuggled or stealthily sold by the manufacturers. These terrorists use same weapons as the forces of US and UK though they certainly do not have access to re-destructive weapons like clear missiles or much more destructive bombs causing death and destruction on much wider scale.

These youths acting as suicide bombers or planting car bombs etc. are not so much fanatics as angry young men boiling with anger at these western countries destroying their countries and killing and raining death and destruction. In UK we see today that how British people are expressing their anger at Muslims of UK, by attacking their mosques because some suspected Muslims planted bombs in central

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London which resulted in loss of 55 innocent lives. Do we call them fanatics? No. They are simply expressing their anger at loss of innocent lives. Just imagine how angry would they have been if UK had been attacked by Iraq or any other Muslim country and it had rained death and destruction on innocent civilians in addition to military targets.

This is not to justify the bombing in London or anywhere by terrorists. It is only to show that it is not mere religious fanaticism as often described in Western media but only anger at invasion of their countries by US and UK and stationing their forces there. It is, in other words, more political than religious. Anyway it is not for spreading Islam that these young men are laying down their lives but to ensure independence of their countries.

I think the West particularly Bush and Blair better refrain from invading these countries if they really care for their democratic values to prevail as they so often declare from every platform. When London was bombed on 7th July Blair and Bush both again declared 'our values shall prevail and we will fight terrorism.' These values must of course prevail but these will not prevail if they destroy others' freedom.

Everyone knows that hatred begets hatred and violence begets violence. In modern world violence should have no place. Before anyone else West must learn this. In their greed for oil they do not hesitate violating international law by invading these countries. UN had not sanctioned war against Iraq and US and UK attacked it and refused to wait for UN sanction. Such brazen violation of international law will only create chaos in the world. Even their excuse about weapons of mass destruction proved to be wrong. Then Bush and Blair started talking of 'regime change'. Can one overthrow governments in other countries? Is it permitted by international law? Certainly not.

Once an American official told me why it is political and not religious issue then if these terrorists invoke Islam. I asked him why President Bush invokes freedom and democracy every time to justify his invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq? He had no answer. Of course when we do something wrong we always invoke some

legitimizing ideology be it religion or some political values like freedom and democracy.

This is only to explain things in proper perspective. I am strong opponent of violence per se, whatever the cause. In the distant past when there was no concept of freedom and democracy violence may have had some justification. It has none in our times. In modern world violence can be very very obnoxious. Science and technology has provided us with highly dangerous weapons. Now even frontal war cannot be restricted to combatants alone. There will always be more civilian casualties than those of the combatants.

For me violence will have no justification even in absence of such destructive weapons. Only love and peace can sustain humanity on this planet. Only greedy or angry people or those who believe in ideology of hate will resort to violence. And as violence begets violence we should not counter violence with violence. Buddha, Mahavir Jain, Christ, Prophet Muhammad (SM) and Mahatma Gandhi in our own times have shown it is only love, peace and compassion which can effectively counter hatred and violence.

In our globalised world all countries are multi-religious and multi-cultural. If few members of one

community use violence against another community it can inflame situation and destroy the very spirit of multi-culturalism. This is precisely what has happened in U.K. and earlier in the US when 9/11 New York towers were attacked. Thus it is very important for protecting multiculturalism to maintain inter-religious and inter-cultural peace.

The unfortunate bombing in Central London on 7th July has dealt a severe blow to multiculturalism in that country. London has very high proportion of religious and cultural minorities - almost 23 per cent - and UK as a whole has 7 per cent. It was very encouraging that religious leaders of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism came together and denounced this senseless bombing and killing of innocent civilians. If religious leaders can come together and denounce senseless and inhuman violence, it can have some mollifying effect.

Though problem is not religions, as pointed out above, yet such an appeal acts as a balm and helps healing the wounds inflicted by such destructive violence. In modern times unfortunately political ideologies have brought more death and destruction as political leaders represent interests of greedy capitalists and in their hunt for profit they do not hesitate to use violence against other countries under one or the other pretext. It, therefore, seems religions can become better resource for peace if religious leaders do not misuse them for their personal interests.

We need more Gandhis in the modern world to spread message of non-violence in politics. What is saddening is that even India experiences so much sectarian and communal violence, which happens to be the land of Gandhi. Rightwing politics of Sangh Parivar preaches ideology of hate to realise their own ambitions of power. In Pakistan the Jihadis play in the hands of vested interests and rightwing religious leaders to perpetrate violence in Pakistani society as well as in neighbouring India.

As I have pointed out in one of my articles earlier the world of Islam also needs a Gandhi to preach love and peace. In the past we had several sufi saints like Maulana Rumi to spread message of love and peace but in modern Islamic world there has not been produced a towering figure like Gandhi or Khan Ghaffar Khan to give soothing message of peace and love. It needs one very badly.

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