

Credible voter list is job number one

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ZAHID HOSSAIN

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The existing inaccurate and defective voters list has, in fact, been made further unwieldy by the recent two-week long so-called up-dating efforts by the Election Commission.

Thus, the prime job of the newly appointed non-party caretaker government will be to ensure updating of the existing voter list in an effective and credible manner.

For that, a properly manned and managed re-constituted Election Commission should be in place without delay. Nobody can deny the fact that there cannot be any question of free, fair, and credible election in the absence of an accurate and reliable electoral roll.

But updating of the voter list in a credible and acceptable way within the shortest possible time will

basically depend on the efficiency, sincerity, and sense of urgency of the Election Commission.

Generally speaking all citizens of voting age, irrespective of race, ethnicity, class, religion, status, or gender have the unhindered right to register as voters. They have also the right to freely participate in election campaigns and to make voluntary choices when casting their secret votes.

Democracy is generally defined as a political system in which citizens enjoy fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, expression, association, assembly and movement. The rule of law and respect for basic human rights also characterize a democracy.

The BNP-Jamaat appointed Election Commission and the Election Commission secretary have been constantly telling the media for the last several weeks that they have fully updated the voter list as per the guidelines of the higher court.

Even a recent BNP-Jamaat alliance delegation, led by former agriculture minister MK Anwar, after having a meeting with the Election

Commission secretary strongly certified that the updated voter list was fully corrected to their satisfaction.

But the position in the field is totally different. Both my wife and myself are citizens of Bangladesh, and have been living in the same house for the last five years or so. Nobody has ever visited our home for registering us as voters.

On a demand from the Awami League-led political alliance, the Election Commission recently took an initiative for updating the voter list by going from house to house. Nobody visited our house. I made two phone calls to the Election Commission giving my full identity, including my 34 years of government service. But it did not work.

Our names have not been enlisted as voters. Interestingly, I have recently made it a point to ask all my friends and relations, whom I happen to meet, as to whether he or she is a voter or not.

Out of possibly 35 such eligible voters, I have so far found only three who have confirmed that their names are on the voter list.

However, the foundation of a

good and fair election is grounded on a proper register of voters. A good register is one that, as far as humanly possible, includes the names of all eligible persons and correctly places them in their respective constituencies or polling areas where they should be.

The personnel who will be charged with the preparation of such a register need, obviously, to demonstrate impartiality, efficiency and skill to ensure that the interest of democracy is served, and confidence in the electoral system is enhanced.

To do this, both the letter and the spirit of the electoral laws must be strictly enforced. The revising officers, their assistants, and others associated with the process must, therefore, ensure that the voting population as a whole has easy access to the registration process.

As a matter of fact, a properly registered voter list should contain the names of all known persons who are eligible to vote in a particular election. During the process of creating the voters list certain procedures should, as far as possible, be undertaken:

- Displaying publicly the voters list for inspection.
- Providing the voter list to political parties and civic organizations for scrutiny.
- Making additions, deletions, or corrections to the voters list based on filed claims and objections.



- Resolving disputes lodged by political parties, civic organizations, or citizens, concerning the inclusion or exclusion of particular individuals from the voter list.

Moreover, a voter list can serve many purposes. It guarantees that those legally entitled to vote are able to do so. It prohibits ineligible people from voting, and prevents people from voting more than once. Thus, a really correctly prepared

voters list brings individuals into the election process, and protects the right of their vote.

To enhance accuracy, efforts should be made to avoid the duplication of names. Even though indelible ink is used during the election, it is imperative that the registration officials make every effort to avoid duplications.

This may be easier in rural areas

than in urban areas since, presumably, more people are likely to know each other in a locality or neighbourhood in a village

Finally, intending candidates, political parties, and civil society organizations must have sufficient opportunity to scrutinize the voter list for errors or omissions. They should have the opportunity to make claims and objections for names to be added, deleted or

corrected, in the voter list.

The claims and objections need to be processed properly, and appropriate changes made to the voter list. Since political parties and intending candidates are the main players of the election game, they should be provided with copies of the preliminary, revised, and the final voter list.

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A defining realignment

As Republican divisions grow, Democrats, pressed by their antiwar grass roots, are drawing together. Except for "Independent Democrat" Senator Joe Lieberman, Democrats are increasingly of one mind about Iraq in particular and antiterrorism strategy in general. A vote on surge spending -- which Democratic Senate leaders had hoped to avoid and which is technically difficult to devise -- now is likely at some point. In general, the party seems less fearful of the old "soft on defense" shibboleth, and ever more tolerant of groups such as Win Without War and Move On.

HOWARD FINEMAN

TED Kennedy speaks with the voice of history. White-maned and nearing 75, the brother of two assassinated heroes and a veteran of 44 Senate years, he is -- in defiance of the odds -- again in his prime: a chairman in good health with a doting wife and a packed legislative agenda.

No one tells Ted Kennedy what to do; in any case, the Senate's Democratic leaders were fine with his plan to give a big speech two days before President George W Bush announced a troop "surge" in Iraq. They are generally glad to let Kennedy play the role he relishes: Irish-American Isaiah, calling his party to account even as legislative insiders keep their distance.

This time party brass got more than they bargained for.

Summoning the authority of his years as an intimate witness to history, Kennedy made an eloquent case for a Senate vote on the surge and for a court test of its legitimacy under the War Powers Resolution. "Iraq is George Bush's Vietnam!" he thundered. "Echoes of that disaster are all around us today!"

It was, in its own way, a defining moment. He got a standing ovation and, the next day, congratulations all around on the Hill. By the end of the week -- in the aftermath of Bush's tepid speech and Condi Rice's evasive testimony -- Kennedy looked prescient.

A generation ago, a war -- Vietnam -- launched a realignment of American politics. Now, it seems increasingly clear, Iraq is doing the same. In 1968 college students flocked to the New Hampshire primary to protest Lyndon

Johnson's policies, sparking a civil war in the Democratic Party on foreign policy that lasted for a generation. By contrast, Vietnam united the GOP around an anti-communist crusade that endured for decades. "Ronald Reagan was gung-ho about Vietnam," says Craig Shirley, a GOP operative and Reagan biographer. "It solidified his world view, and the party's."

Now a mirror image is developing. Democrats seem to be uniting around a theme -- the primacy of global diplomacy and congressional review. Republicans, by contrast, have lost the unity that they had during the cold war and the early years of the war on terror.

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Lieberman, Democrats are increasingly of one mind about Iraq in particular and antiterrorism strategy in general. A vote on surge spending -- which Democratic Senate leaders had hoped to avoid and which is technically difficult to devise -- now is likely at some point. In general, the party seems less fearful of the old "soft on defense" shibboleth, and ever more tolerant of groups such as Win Without War and Move On. One of the Senate's few other hawkish Democrats, Senator Evan Bayh, told me that he opposes the surge, and agreed that Congress might have to face the question of funding at some point. The Senate's growing ranks of Democratic presidential contenders -- Chris Dodd jumped in recently, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are expected to do so soon -- are gravitating toward a bring-them-home-quickly stance. "We don't want to come off looking like wimps," said Terry McAuliffe, a Clinton supporter and former party chairman. But he added: "We're jumping all over ourselves now to see who can be the toughest on Bush and the war." It's a fateful competition -- which Ted Kennedy already won.

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The Republican revolt

How close is Bush to losing his own party?

RICHARD WOLFFE, HOLLY BAILEY AND ELEANOR CLIFT

A day before President George W Bush went on TV to explain his decision to send more troops to Iraq, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell called his Republican colleagues together for a private talk. Several GOP senators had already come out against the plan. McConnell, Bush's closest Senate supporter on Iraq, hoped to keep others from defecting. He urged his colleagues to stand together at least until Bush had the chance to speak to the country. After the meeting, the senators went outside the room to display their unity to waiting reporters. McConnell said he thought more troops were just the thing to "give us a chance to succeed." He then stepped aside so the other senators could second his sentiments. No one came forward. McConnell's eye fell on Trent Lott. "Trent?" McConnell said, motioning him toward the microphone. "I don't think I have anything to add," said Lott.

Bush expected at least a hand-



ful of Republican senators -- critics like Chuck Hagel and George Voinovich -- to run from a troop increase. But the White House was surprised when even pro-war senators, including Sam Brownback and Lisa Murkowski, came out against the plan. Other prominent senators, including Lott and John Warner, the senior Republican on the Armed Services Committee, have been quiet. They

aren't bashing the idea, but they aren't promoting it either. Warner and Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, are contemplating a resolution to draw bipartisan support for the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group report.

Senior administration officials, who declined to speak on the record about private deliberations,

say the president knows he has to show real improvements in Iraq within two or three months or risk losing even more GOP support. "All the talking points aren't going to make the difference," says a senior aide. "What matters is what happens ... on the streets and the neighborhoods of Baghdad."

A former senior Bush aide who is still close to the White House says if things don't improve, a delegation of Republican senators could one day show up in the Oval Office to tell Bush that the party is no longer with him and the war must end -- much like Senator William Fulbright's forcefully urging Lyndon Johnson to bring the Vietnam War to a close. (Warner told Newsweek he "wouldn't hesitate" to tell Bush if he came to believe Bush's policy was failing.) Bush's challenge isn't just to take control of Baghdad, but to win back control of his party. "Before this, the president's credibility was hanging by a thread," says the former aide. "After this, I don't know. It may be lost."

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Is Southeast Asia becoming China's playpen?

How deep can China push into Southeast Asia? At the moment, there is an active balance in the region, and any power that seeks dominance will likely push other powers, together with ASEAN, into a stronger resistance to maintain this balance.

SHENG LIJUN

CHINA'S diplomatic success in Southeast Asia has often been fortuitous. Changes in the international and regional strategic environment, together with US absent-mindedness and negligence of the region, have played a major role in a closer embrace of China and Southeast Asia.

History shows how the international as well as the regional strategic landscape can change overnight.

That happened with US rapprochement with China in 1972, forcing Association of South-East Asia Nations (ASEAN) nations such as Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines to swiftly change their respective policies on China and establish diplomatic relations with Beijing, despite no fundamental changes in China's Southeast Asia policy and no massive increase in China's military muscle and economic attractiveness.

When Deng Xiaoping stepped into power in 1978, eager to open China up and push into Southeast Asia, a blessing in disguise soon followed -- Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia from 1979 to 1989. China made good use of this "occupation" and effectively kick-started

its initial cooperation with ASEAN. This engagement, lasting more than a decade, laid a solid foundation for relations in the subsequent years. The US, concerned about Soviet influence in the region, acquiesced and even encouraged this strong engagement. Once again China succeeded in going deeper into Southeast Asia without massive increase in its military muscle and economic attractiveness.

Just as ASEAN put the Cambodia issue onto a backburner, the Cold War ended and new uncertainties emerged in the region. Deciding against a passive wait for changes, ASEAN took the initiative and actively pursued engaging all the major powers in the region. Up until the end of the Cold War, ASEAN attempted policy that would push all extra-regional big powers out of the region. Realizing that it was impossible to push them out of the region, ASEAN, from the 1990s, began what it called "constructive engagement" with all of them. Under the policy, major powers balance one another while ASEAN is the primary driving force for a constructive balance. For this purpose, ASEAN needed China's political backing to play its role as the primary driving force in this process. Under this

backdrop, China scored an easy diplomatic success by building its first official ties with the ASEAN grouping in 1991.

The ASEAN-China relationship in the early was tentative at best. Not long after came a big push: the Asian economic crisis in late 1997. While the US, for its own reasons, was slow to come to rescue, China readily responded to ASEAN's acute need, with an immediate promise not to devalue its currency, the Renminbi, and further destabilize the region. By November 1997, the lukewarm relationship evolved to the level of annual ASEAN+China summits.

This momentum receded as ASEAN countries withstood the shockwaves of the economic crisis, but then came another boost: The 9/11 terror attacks, which plunged the US into a seemingly endless war against terrorism. The increasing focus of the US on homeland security, Central Asia and the Middle East was accompanied by a negligence of Southeast Asia. In 2001, China made a diplomatic masterpiece by proposing a free-trade agreement with ASEAN to accelerate its cooperation with ASEAN, thus maintaining and even building its momentum in Southeast Asia.

The brief examination of recent

history tells us that China has gained its influence in Southeast Asia less by "muscles" and more by skillfully exploiting changes in the international and regional environment, absent any wise and strong US engagement with the region -- together providing strong "pulls" for ASEAN toward a China that is more than willing to "push" into the region.

Many observers have noted only the Chinese "pushes" without seeing ASEAN's "pulls" and their strategic background. Without such "pulls," however, China's "pushes" will not get far and may backfire. Take the warming in China-Indonesia relations for example: The two nations have declared each other as strategic partners, which may have a lot to do with Muslim Indonesia's intention to use China to balance the excessive US pressure against Islamic extremists in the country. Indonesia's overture to build defense ties with China and buy Chinese weapons can be interpreted as a tactical rather than a strategic re-orientation, a means to pressure the US to lift its arms embargo on Indonesia.

Myanmar and Cambodia both have close relations with China. In the case of Myanmar, the US has chosen not to engage with its government, likewise rejecting trade or investment. US trade sanctions and embargo against Myanmar still stand. China is Cambodia's top investor and trade partner. The US, for political reasons, still has no significant trade or investment in

Cambodia. If the US changes its policy and prioritizes these two countries, China may find it difficult to maintain its primacy there.

While there is less public talk of a "China threat," Washington can take some comfort from the fact that distrust of China remains deep-rooted in the region and may grow if a rising China enters too deep. ASEAN countries have not joined the China bandwagon but "hedge," engaging China while developing robust ties with the US and other extra-regional powers to balance China. Asian countries generally do not have much trust for one another and the US is perceived as the least distrusted of all major powers. Asian nations need the US as a balancer and double insurance when they develop their relations with China. ASEAN is aware that without a strong relationship with the US, China may take ASEAN for granted.

A vigorous but balanced relationship with the US is seen as not only security insurance but also an incentive for China to offer more economic sweeteners. Barring a sudden and major change in the international strategic landscape and a disaster in US Southeast Asia policy that would unexpectedly boost China's influence by default, the more China pushes in deepening its relations with ASEAN, the more ASEAN may feel that it needs a strong relationship with the US and other extra-regional power to keep the balance.

The US is, thus, still favourably



poised to keep and enhance its position in this region. However, as illustrated by recent history, success depends less on "muscles" and more on "brain" that can quickly exploit any changes in the strategic environment, less on how many resources a country has but on how much it is willing to spend. Washington does not lack the resources, but the willingness to use them profusely for the region, at least for now.

How deep can China push into

Southeast Asia? At the moment, there is an active balance in the region, and any power that seeks dominance will likely push other powers, together with ASEAN, into a stronger resistance to maintain this balance. Any success China has in pushing further is less likely due to its growing "muscles" but more due to an ever-changing international and regional strategic environment that may suddenly multiply those "muscles" for a much deeper penetration. In this sense,

continued US negligence of the region and absent-mindedness to the ever-changing strategic environment in the region will cost it dearly.

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