

# The case of voter identification

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THE year 2006 in Bangladesh can aptly be termed the year of the voter list. The whole year, act after act, the drama of voter listing, delisting, mislisting and over-listing unfolded as a nonplussed Election Commission committed one blunder after another, reportedly at the behest of the immediate past elected govt., their so-called puppet masters.

All the while the opposition parties, unequivocally, have been demanding an accurately updated voter list -- meaning to:

- Add new voters (those who have turned 18) to
- Delete deceased voters from and
- Remove ghost voters from the last parliamentary election voter rolls i.e., the one updated in 2001.

This demand is a very logical one, and should have been done routinely by the Election Commission even if nobody demanded it.

However, what the Election Commission did was to bypass the 2001 voter list and create an ab initio voter list, which according to all non-partisan analysts contained serious flaws on account of:

- Up to 10 million ghost voters, presumably to the advantage of the last ruling party
- Not listing bona fide voters who are known to be supporters of a major opposition party
- Nearly 10% incomplete voter records as the voter-list was done in a hurry.

A prominent citizen moved the matter in the High Court, which gave the ruling that the ab initio voter list was invalid. Subsequently, the Election Commission had to relent and go for updating the 2001 list. Here also the influence of the immediate past ruling coalition became obvious, as many voters of the opposition camp were simply delisted, while the past ruling party supporters had multiple entries for the same voter.

In this scenario the opposition pressure for voter roll rectification mounted, and the caretaker govt. repeated the exercise for their appeasement, without substantial improvement in the quality of the voter list. By now the exasperated opposition started demanding voter identity cards -- popularly called voter IDs -- as a means to ensure proper identification of voters and check voter fraud.

Of course, the issue of voter IDs is not new to Bangladesh. More than one hundred and seventy crore taka of taxpayers' money was spent over five years, between 1995 and 2000, to produce nearly five crore voter IDs. That ill-conceived voter ID project had to be abandoned midstream forcing the then govt. to revert to traditional voter rolls.

## Have ID will vote

Now why all this fuss about voter IDs again -- is it only to provide a

convenient excuse for the present non-party govt., formed under an emergency, to extend their stay in power? Is it the only means of proper voter identification, how long will it really take to produce them, is it just an ID for voting, used once and redone every five years, or should it be a more general purpose national identity card?

These are all valid policy-level questions, and there are also other more technical questions regarding the technology, logistics, legislation, implementation and business issues of such a large undertaking.

This author will attempt to debunk the myths and misconceptions surrounding the voter IDs, delineate the ground realities regarding the issues raised, and provide a summary recommendation on how proper voter identification can be achieved within a framework of protecting national interest and integrity of the electoral process.

## Need for identification

Identification of a person is a basic function that is a prerequisite to transactions of all kinds, whether it is between two individuals, between an individual and a business entity or between an individual and a state/govt. agency.

Virtually all countries in the world (Bangladesh is certainly conspicuous by its absence) provide identification to their citizens, either through driving license (as most citizens above the age of 16 own and/or operate motor-vehicles), or a national ID (for disabled people and people whose driving licenses are revoked due to serious driving violations, as well as those who choose not to drive).

Such an ID is generally used for identification at banks, post offices, college/universities, parks, airports, hotels, hospitals, govt. offices and, of course, during voting of any kind. Passports are a higher-level (and costly) form of identification used primarily for cross-border traveling, and consular services in a foreign land.

In our country very few people have driving licenses (and even fewer genuine ones), and passport-carrying citizens are few and far between, so a generally accepted instrument of identification is sorely needed for the general populace.

There have been a lot of discussions in public and private forums lately on voter IDs, and on the necessity of a "flawless voter list." To get to the bottom of this it is necessary to examine the technical and commercial issues first.

The national software industry association called Basis has worked out an elaborate paper on these issues for submission to the interim government (the author is a former president of



Basis and sits in the committee that drafted the techno-commercial paper). It won't be appropriate to get into the details of that here, but let me summarize some of the salient points for a general understanding of the technical and commercial issues.

## Identification technologies

The technologies used for identity cards vary greatly depending on -- **Durability features:** Cards can be for single use, such as the voter ID cards produced by FBCCI, Basis and other trade/chamber bodies for their board elections. Such cards can be very low-tech and produced cheaply. However, they only work in situations where the persons are usually recognized by peers, and do not require explicit fraud prevention. On the other end are cards meant for long-term use (presumably 10 years or longer), such as machine-readable passports, driving licenses and national ID cards. These cards are obviously more expensive than cards of the first type, but the cost differential is insignificant compared to the cost of the process of producing such cards (for information collection, data processing, logistics management, infrastructure setup and maintenance and other related activities).

**Security (fraud prevention) features:** Available security features range from micro-text to ultra-violet (UV) light readable text/pictures, to globally registered security holograms, which can prevent unauthorized duplication. The costs of these features are highly volume dependent. For tens of millions of cards such features will add little cost. However, the logistics set-up of checking for fraud will initially require some investment, as micro/UV readers will have to be procured for all points where such cards will be used, and personnel will have to be trained on their use.

**Mode of use (active/passive):** For cards with active components (such as smart-cards) electronic equipments are needed at all use-points, and uninterrupted electricity is a must for that. Passive components such as barcodes or magnetic strips also require electronic readers. There are alternative ways to ensure continuous

power, even though many parts of the country are outside the reach of electric utilities.

**Purpose(s) of use:** Aside from the basic utilitarian identification purpose, a smart-chip based ID card can have a host of other functions such as a bank ATM card, tax payment card, electronic cash card (e-wallet), medical card, premises access card, etc. More features also mean more memory and processing power and, thus, more expense per card. A contact-less smart card can even be read by proximity readers without the cardholder actually using the card. This particular technology feature has raised eyebrows in many countries as it has the power to intrude into people's privacy. However, we don't have to add all the features to a national ID card, thus limiting the possibility of abuse by the government.

**Authentication features:** Biometric features such as fingerprints, facial features, iris scan etc. can be added for authentication of the identity of the cardholder. However, this adds cost and complexity to the process, and it may take several years for a stable

system to be deployed. Under homeland security bill, the US government introduced fingerprinting of all trans-border travelers to that country in phases, and it took nearly four years to start operation.

**Environmental requirements:** Depending on whether the card is used indoors or outdoors, is preserved in high or low moisture conditions, is bent or sheared during use, and other environmental conditions, the card material and components used will vary, and so will the cost.

**Other features:** There could be other features, such as personalization features (say CIP logo on cards for good taxpayers is one example). The permutation and combination of features on smart cards is virtually limitless.

## Logistics

The logistics requirements of such an undertaking, whether as a one-off voter ID card or a more generally used national ID card, are enormous to say the least. The main logistics needs are in the areas of -- a. Setting up a multi-tier organization, from thana level to the center for

- Information & picture collection and verification.
- Data entry and maintenance.
- Card printing and delivery. Such an organization can be created temporarily (a huge wastage of time, effort and money), or more judiciously as a permanent setup under a line ministry.

b. Procuring equipment for the central data center (dozens of high-end servers, card printers, envelope stuffers, etc.) as well as regional and thana level data processing facilities, field data acquisition and reading devices (thousands of digital cameras, fingerprint readers, card readers in case of smart cards) etc.

c. Recruiting and training thousands of dedicated staffers to run the whole system, including several lac data collectors to carry out the initial task of gathering pictures and information on all adult citizens of the country.

## Business issues

The technologies used in identity cards are widely available in Bangladesh and well known in the industry. However, technology in itself is the best-understood and least problematic issue in the overall scheme of things when contemplating ID cards on a national scale.

Managing the technical benchmarks and the logistics of outsourcing the data collection, verification, processing and delivery mechanisms to a large number of IT service providers, are the real nightmares lurking in the guts of such an undertaking. Any attempt at transplanting such a scheme from another country, no matter how successful over there, is a sure-shot recipe for disaster.

At the same time, bypassing

technical needs of the project for expediency will lead to failure, as in 2000. The software and IT services business community stands as one with the nation in this hour of need, to ensure the successful implementation of an appropriate voter identification system within a timeframe set by the government.

We would do well to remember that Congo spent around \$ 400 million for only 20 million cards recently, and a botched attempt by the immediate past government to award the work for national ID cards and machine readable passports & visa to a foreign company reportedly would have set the nation back a few hundred million dollars, with lingering doubts on whether it would have ever delivered anything except making a few cronies of the past party in power filthy rich.

## Legislation

The AL-led government in 1999 passed laws making voter ID cards mandatory for voting. They had to swallow their pride and rescind that law in 2000 after the voter ID card project was shelved.

There is a lot of talk about making laws to make national ID cards a pre-requisite for passports, opening bank accounts etc. This author believes that such restrictive measures will only highlight the negative aspects of such a scheme, and then the scheme will never take off.

For example, even if a nationwide ID card scheme is introduced either as a general identity card or simply as a voter ID card, making laws to make such cards mandatory for the exercise of a person's franchise rights will face numerous challenges in the courts of law, even if a small percentage of bona-fide voters are left out of the system.

Traditional instruments of voter number, name, etc. should be allowed alongside for identification purposes, if a person cannot produce the voter ID or national ID.

In other words let there be a national registry of citizens set up, first for issuing national ID cards, and if it earns the confidence of the people then, by choice and habit, people will use it to authenticate their identity in matters of state or business.

## Policy imperatives

The major policy issues were posed as questions towards the beginning of this article. Let's examine them further here. As has been shown earlier, the need for identification is a general one and cannot be reduced to the voting function alone (voting determines who gets to manage the resources of the government but proper identification has more immediate utility to the citizens in managing their own properties and finances).

As such, to even consider a one-off voter ID card scheme is a crooked exercise. In the current circumstances the government has three options :

- A national ID card based on the high-tech smart cards.
- A simpler ID card with picture and some security features to prevent fraud.
- A voter list with pictures -- in all these three options the cards or the lists need to be the outputs of a central data base, which acts as the repository of identity information of all adult citizens.

That would certainly require a permanent setup under a line ministry (as was contemplated under the botched Home Ministry initiative for the machine readable national ID and passports project -- possibly the only redeeming feature of that project).

In fact, one of the most idiotic and unforgivable acts of prodigal squandering of public money is the repeated voter list preparation exercises undertaken by the Election Commission every five years, without setting up a technically sound database management system with permanent staffing -- and the result is that after spending nearly a thousand crore taka in the last 12 years the Election Commission today cannot provide a high-integrity database of voter records.

So, whichever option the present interim government exercises, setting up a permanent national registry is a sine qua non for the success of any nationwide identity cards project.

Second, policy imperative -- don't make restrictive legislation making such cards mandatory for casting votes, for opening bank accounts, getting passports or for dining out (if you know what I mean).

Now that you have become familiar with the ID card issues let us come to the summary conclusions. I believe, based on the political mood of the major parties, option three, i.e. updated voter list with pictures, is the best way forward as this will take the minimum amount of time and money.

However, this has to be done as an output of a permanent national registry, which needs to be set up under an ordinance. Once the registry is there, other more advanced and versatile products such as smart card based national IDs, or machine-readable passports, can be produced with incremental investments and timeframes from the same setup.

In this short span of a couple of thousand words I may have raised more questions than I have answers for but, hopefully, the key points will not be lost on the serious readers.

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