

Polls only after basic reforms

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Kamal and Yasmeen Murshid, Awami League (AL) leader Tofail Ahmed, former law minister Moudud Ahmed, Shujan Secretary Badiul Alam Majumder, Lt Gen (retired) Harun-ur Rashid, barristers Anisul Islam Mahmood and Tanjib ul Alam, economist Dr Atiur Rahman and Dhaka University teacher Asif Nazrul, researcher Dr Mustafizur Rahman and Sharmeen Murshid of Brotee took part in the discussion.

AUTHENTIC VOTER LIST

Former adviser Akbar Ali Khan noted that having separate voter lists for males and females is discriminatory, and they [rolls] create room for confusion.

He said a voter list must be based on a national database and so developing one right from the grassroots level should be one of the main priorities.

He added that the voter roll prepared in 2000 should be updated in accordance with the Supreme Court directives.

The EC had already violated the constitution by having three voter lists instead of one, he observed. The list must be published before the unveiling of the election schedule.

Prof Muzaffer said the biggest challenge for the EC lies in preparing voter rolls in Dhaka and Chittagong. "A lot of problems could be overcome if the list is updated during local elections," he added.

Noted jurist Dr Kamal Hossain said the process of preparing or updating the voter list is massively defective since the agents who collect, check and register names on the list have been openly partisan.

Badiul Alam Majumder proposed that local government could be engaged in voter roll correction. Outlining a model, he said, "A four-member committee headed by ward commissioners can complete the revision task at the ward level. Going from door to door with one of them taking photographs of the prospective voters, they can have the job done in four to five days."

After scrutiny at the union parishad (UP) level, the list could be sent to the upazila level where 60 computer operators working in shifts will enter the data into 30 computers. The draft list with the photographs pasted on it will be returned to the UP level up for public display and for making necessary correction, he said.

"The entire process that might cost up to Tk 175 crore, and take 75 days to be completed will stop duplication of voters," he said, adding that the computers can be used at the UP offices later.

Barrister Tanjib, however, pointed out there is no provision of attaching photographs to the voter lists and the RPO needs to be amended for this.

Former army chief Harun-ur Rashid said the list can be prepared in 75 days. "Members of the armed forces can assist in the job with their expertise and experience in data entry, and I think it will make the list more credible," he said.

The database should be prepared in a way so it can be used later for preparing national ID cards, he added.

AL Presidium Member Tofail Ahmed proposed that the government declare a two-day holiday and ask the people to remain in their houses to make sure their names are on the voter roll.

EC REFORMS AND AUTONOMY
Akbar Ali asked for reconstituting the EC immediately so that it can assess and inform the people of the time needed to carry out the electoral reforms.

Calling on the government to immediately appoint a CEC who would be capable of running the commission independently and effectively, governments would not be able to function if they started to micro-manage all institutions.

He said the EC, not the government, should decide on the feasibility of introducing the voter ID cards and also inform the public of the estimated time the process might take.

Akbar described the EC as the "most wasteful" of all government institutions and regretted that Tk 70 crore from public purse has gone down the drain due to the discredited voter list prepared by it.

Muzaffer said the CG and EC should always be open to civil society proposals like the one for a special audit into the EC expenditures to see how Tk 200 crore was reportedly wasted. He mentioned at that point failures of the past voter ID projects.

He underscored the need for a bipartisan approach in choosing a CEC while a neutral approach in recruiting poll-related other officials.

DR Kamal, meanwhile, said that the EC must have a secretariat independent of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), as it is now.

He said successive governments have unjustifiably meddled in the work of the EC, and rendered it partisan. The EC, Dr Kamal said, should be immediately reconstituted to flush out those who are partisan to the core.

"You (CG) need not consult Awami League or the BNP; please appoint someone [as the CEC] who is competent and who can withstand

pressures from both the parties," said Tofail.

Moudud Ahmed echoed the view of Tofail. He said the EC does not need too many commissioners when two will suffice.

He admitted that the voter roll prepared during their term is flawed. He said there's nothing wrong with introducing the voter IDs if that can be done in three months. However, it will not be right to stretch the tenure of the interim government on this pretext, he added.

To make the changes meaningful, the other institutions should also be reformed, said Tanjib-ul Alam. The EC must be strong enough to be tough on the electoral rules violators including those who submit false statements, he noted.

ELECTION EXPENSES

As the discussants put their heads together on stopping the use of black money in elections, Prof Muzaffer urged the ACC, NBR and EC to find a solution together to the black-money crisis in elections.

Proper implementation of the RPO can stop all irregularities but due to certain decision makers, the RPO was not implemented and most cases were summarily dismissed, he said.

With the politicisation of the EC and National Board of Revenue (NBR), the government already lost the first line of defence against the corrupt and black money holders, said Akbar Ali.

It is not impossible to prevent the corrupt from getting nominations, and a better result is possible by eliminating even 10 percent corruption, he said, asking for making the ACC functional to bring the black money holders to book before they have the opportunity to run for elections.

Kamal Hossain, however, said it is not just the black money but a whole set of corrupt practices related to election process, which is harmful. He said bribing election officials and buying off blocks of poor voters should also face the full application of criminal law.

The Tk 5 lakh cap on election expenses seems to be a joke as in practice Tk 5 crore is spent, he said, adding that the challenge is how to close this gap.

Those who are not willing to violate the law are withdrawing from politics, said Dr Kamal, adding that this is disenfranchised and disempowered honest candidates in elections. "If the results reflect money and muscle, how can you hope to elect an honest person?" he said.

Harun-ur Rashid said members of the armed forces can be engaged in enforcing election rules.

For making election propaganda free of black money or excessive use of money in general, Dr Mustafizur Rahman proposed installing billboard at specific points, fixing special points for holding rallies, and allocating airtime on television and radio.

ELECTION TRIBUNAL

Dhaka University professor Asif Nazrul pointed out that there is a provision in the RPO for seven-year jail for violating election rules, which, he said, is not followed properly.

Both CM Shafi Sami and Asif Nazrul noted that the EC inquiry committee cannot debar a candidate from contesting election even after finding him/her ineligible.

Echoing the view, Yasmeen Murshid proposed formation of an "election disqualification commission" with this power.

Asif Nazrul proposed cutting of lawmakers' parliamentary privileges that delay disposal of election and post-election disputes in the court.

Besides ensuring transparency of the presiding officers, returning officers and the polling centres, Shafi Sami stressed the need for improving law and order to stop capturing polling booths to much extent.

Barrister Tanjib pointed out that the judiciary needs to be strengthened to deal with the cases and it should be ensured that the politically biased people cannot influence the judiciary.

REFORMS OF POLITICAL PARTIES

Tofail Ahmed said people have very high expectations from the politicians, but politics has no longer any place for honest and sincere people.

He said regardless of the faults of seasoned politicians "these days people no longer need to be experienced in politics to become members of parliament or reach high places in politics."

Akbar Ali Khan suggested that a candidate must have primary membership of the party for three years before one can seek nomination for polls. The RPO is not sufficient and should be amended for proper registration of the political parties, he noted.

Kamal Hossain criticised the current political situation where politicians who play foul are rewarded and those who follow the rules are disadvantaged.

He urged the political parties to develop a code of conduct to which they will voluntarily adhere, and the policymakers to prosecute the violators of those codes.

He said the ACC should be given the mandate to prosecute those, who abuse their power for private

gain, by immediately disqualifying and severely punishing them. A national referendum would reject these politicians as their representatives, he suggested.

The MPs turn into local administrators without neglecting their real duty of making laws, said Harun-ur Rashid, adding that half the problems would have been solved if the local government had its due power and authority.

Moudud Ahmed and Badiul Alam Majumder proposed dissolving the student wings of the political parties to get politics out of the educational institutions. They also asked for ban on hartal through a consensus among the political parties.

However, Tofail said student politics has a long history in Bangladesh and it is the corrupt state of politics that has to be eliminated so that student politics can assist in running the educational institutions.

He said he is in favour of reforms in the political parties. "It is up to us, the political parties who have failed, and we really need to think where we went wrong and where we are going wrong," he added.

The political parties can be reformed through the RPO, Asif Nazrul said, proposing a change to the RPO for inclusion of information on political parties' income and expenditure, and holding of party councils.

Former cabinet secretary Hafizuddin Khan said, "The lawmakers are busy in everything other than lawmaking...Both the major political parties opposed to registration."

Moudud and Tofail voiced agreement on political parties' registration **APPOINTMENT TO CONSTITUTIONAL POSTS**

The discussants agreed about bringing clean and competent people to constitutional posts in the EC, ACC and PSC and recommended formation of panel for appointment to the posts.

To ensure that competent and neutral persons come to the posts, decisions taken in the depoliticised mechanism can later be ratified by majority of the ruling and opposition lawmakers, some of them suggested.

The political parties give appointment to the constitutional posts considering who will serve their interest best, Atiur Rahman said, adding that the PSC has become a den of corruption.

He proposed a panel of non-controversial persons for appointment of clean people to the constitutional posts.

DEPOLITICISATION OF ADMINISTRATION

Rehman Sobhan noted that the corruption of social and political systems has forced people to manipulate procedure in the administration, judiciary and even the security forces.

He also lamented what he termed the manipulative nature of the two major political parties in Bangladesh.

Moudud Ahmed said goodwill of the political leadership is needed as political interference in administration, judiciary or the armed forces cannot be solved only through legal provision.

Government officials should be promoted through a collegiate system, should not be given extensions or forced into retirement, and there should be a provision that they will not enter politics within three years of retirement to develop a culture of neutrality in administration, Shafi Sami said.

"This is the caretaker government's honeymoon period. The fact that they haven't done much with the EC has raised questions among the people," said Tofail.

"Tough days are ahead for us," he said, adding, "We [Awami League] understand that there has to be quick elections, but with the proper reforms."

Sultana Kamal said, "I think people are happy to see the caretaker government's use of the state of emergency up till now. I would like to see the state of emergency used to prepare the voter list."

Out of basic moral accountability, the CG must show that they will rehabilitate the slum-dwellers who have been evicted, Sultana said, while also urging the government to look into extra-judicial killings by certain law enforcement agencies.

Dr Kamal said BTV should be made autonomous immediately, while the CG must also set an example of efficient resource allocation for future governments.

Former adviser Lt Gen (ret'd) Hasan Mashhurd Chowdhury said the primary challenge for the caretaker government is to perform a delicate balancing act between holding elections as early as possible and people's expectations to put things right.

He urged the CG to keep up the momentum of reform, but also stressed the need for setting a timeframe to provide people a visible yardstick of the CG's success.

The CG should be given some space to breathe, so they can try to achieve some of their objectives without overwhelming pressure, he added.

The CG should not stay in power for over 90 days and should have

only one agenda to run day-to-day office work and assist the EC in holding the election, Moudud Ahmed said.

"It [CG] should not take any decision regarding policy making and must announce a timeframe. I think holding an election is possible in three months," he said, adding that state of emergency and democracy cannot go together.

Since it is impossible for the CG to fulfil all expectations of people, it should find out the doable and fix agenda accordingly, Harun-ur Rashid said, adding, "There may be advisory committee for each prioritised issue and other people should assist them."

Yasmeen Murshid proposed formation of a 6-8 member national task force including one to two advisers for finding the doable in a specific timeframe.

LAW AND ORDER

Instead of going against the weak and the vulnerable, the armed forces should find the biggest violators first, Dr Kamal said, adding, "Let Bangladesh know that law and order has been restored. That no one, no 'hbanan' is above the law."

The punishment should be commensurate with the crime and electoral fraud should be dealt with severely, he said.

OTEHR IMPERATIVES

Saying that the previous government failed to separate the judiciary from executive and form Human Rights Commission due to 'political reasons', Moudud Ahmed hailed the CG for its initiative and asked it to form the Human Rights Commission, sign in UN anti-corruption charter and to cut weekly holidays to one day.

He also urged formulating ACC rules.

Drive against illegal structures along Ichhamati river from Feb 1

UNB, Pabna

The district administration will start an eviction drive on February 1 to remove illegal structures on the bank of Ichhamati river.

Administration sources said they have identified 285 occupants who have set up illegal establishments in five km area from Dakkhin Mandalpara to Uttar Shalgaria crematorium, making the river narrow.

The officials said they have already issued notices on 140 people in the first phase asking them to remove their illegal establishments within the next seven days.

They will soon serve notices on the remaining occupants giving a deadline for removing the structures.

NGO director

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the rights of the landless people in the area and it is alleged that certain quarters are behind Shahidul Islam's arrest as Uttaran's bold stance against their interests, said sources.

Prof Yunus

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micro-credit in India, challenges of reaching the poorest with micro-credit, regulatory and legal issues facing micro-finance development in India, and participation of commercial banks and other financial institutions in micro-finance development in India.

Micro-finance leaders in India are expected to present papers as authors, chair various sessions and participate as panelists in the conference.

Delegates from Grameen Trust partners and other micro-finance practitioners in India as well as policymakers and leaders of public and private sectors, business executives, social activists, members of the civil society, academics, diplomats and other dignitaries are expected to participate in the conference.

The "Training Programme on Grameen Generalised System" will focus on the latest innovations from the Nobel Prize winning organisation, Grameen Bank.

During his three-day stay in Mumbai, Prof Yunus will have a busy schedule. He will meet the leaders of Bombay Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI), have one-to-one meeting with the Governor of Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the chairman of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (Nabard) and deliver lectures to the RBI and Nabard staffs.

On February 3, the founder of Grameen Bank will attend a meeting to be organised by the Federation of India Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) at Sophia Hall and address the students at Mumbai University on its campus.

On the same day, Prof Yunus will leave India for Bahrain.

Rab man

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"I rushed to the spot and rescued five injured people, mostly pedestrians, and rushed them to DMCH on my patrol van," he added.

Detective and Crime Intelligence Unit of Police and Rab cordoned off the area in search for clues. However, first-hand accounts of the incident could not confirm whether the bomb was placed there or hurled at the Rab vehicle.

Serena

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achieved the feat in 1978.

Williams unleashed a barrage of winners throughout the match and set the tone for what was to come when she broke Sharapova in her first service game and completely overwhelmed the world number one elect to seal victory in 63 minutes and claim her eighth grand slam title.

Williams, twice former champion but unseeded due to injury problems last year, clinched the first set in 26 minutes when Sharapova sent a backhand wide.

Williams broke serve again in the opening game of the second set and romped through it to win her third Australian Open title.

Fake medicine

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The law enforcers arrested Shahadat Hossain, who had been running the illegal business, during the seven-hour raid ending at 7:00pm. The raid was conducted following a tip-off, Lt Commander Arif of Rab-1, who led the operation, told The Daily Star.

Mixing several types of powdered chemicals with distilled water, the unscrupulous businessman used to bottle the substances first. Then he pasted labels of reputed pharmaceuticals, like GalxoSmithKline, and marketed those, the Rab commander said.

The several thousand bottles of fake medicines included Eveux-B, Veril Rix, Hiberix, with price ranging from Tk 350 to Tk 1,350 per bottle, he added.

Besides, syringes, packaging materials and some other items were also seized from the spot.

Shahadat confessed that he sold those fake medicines in Mitford wholesale market.

On Thursday, members of Rab-10 seized 2,160 bottles of spurious medicines of Pustilplus brand, 1,000 empty bottles and 2,000 corks from Mitford medicine market.

None could be arrested during the drive.

OC, 4 other

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the punitive measure.

The OC was accused of utter negligence of duty, inefficiency and misbehaviour, said a press release from the police headquarters yesterday.

Moreover, the acts of the four other police personnel (as seen in the newspaper photo) have made the image of the police questionable, the release added.

A two-tola gold necklace was found from Ratan Kumar, who police tortured after hanging from the ceiling at Sadar Police Station on Thursday, without showing him arrested as a suspect in a 25-tola gold theft case, DIG Khan said.

On January 25, SI Karim picked up Ratan in Upasharhar area for his suspected link with gold stealing but the police showed him arrested on Friday on the same charge.

Ratan yesterday confessed to his involvement in the theft to journalists present at the police station.

Ratan, a resident of Dalpatti in Bogra town, is also a suspected heroin peddler, police said.

Tender ignored

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reducing the turn around time of the vessels.

If the appointment of stevedores takes place through tender, cargo handling at the port would improve as it would come under proper planning, said Amirul Haque, chairman of port and shipping standing committee of CCCI and FBCCI.

The cost for stevedores goes high as the port officials illegally dictate the number of employees to be appointed in a gang whereas the employer concerned should appoint the employees as per requirement, he said, adding that the CPA has been hostage to 1,435 employees who work under various stevedores' agencies.

The CPA has also renewed some old licences of stevedores' agencies without having no objection certificate (NOC) from Bangladesh Master Stevedores Association (BMSA). The BMSA in a recent protest letter to the CPA said such renewal violates the previous decisions in this regard.

Demanding cancellation of the licences that have been renewed without NOC, the BMSA said otherwise this type of practice would hamper relation between BMSA and the CPA.

CA's vision of Bangladesh?

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publication or transmission of any anti-government news, editorial, post-editorial, article, feature, cartoon, talk show or discussion in any print or electronic media and any mass media, including the internet....The government will be able to proscribe (meaning ban) any newspaper, book, document, printing press, equipment of electronic media if any news or information is published or propagated violating government order.... Restrictions have also been put on any provocative remark or activity against the government and its programmes, and on drawing a cartoon or making an effigy of an individual with ulterior political motive." The promulgation further says, "The government will have the right to ask any individual to submit information or material to a person or authority designated.... If any individual does not submit the information or material...the individual will have to suffer a maximum of five years or minimum of two years rigorous imprisonment."

A cursory reading of the above rules makes it very clear that if we are to be journalists worth the paper our names are written on, then we have no alternative but to suffer imprisonment. Because if we cannot write the truth as we know it, if we cannot give authentic information to our readers and viewers as we see it, if we cannot interpret events as we honestly understand it, then we might as well close down all the newspapers.

It was during president Shahabuddin's time that all provisions of banning a newspaper were forever withdrawn from our statutes. It is now back! How can there be any journalism if we cannot report critically on government policies, programmes and actions? Even cartoons, for which Bangladesh enjoys a special recognition, may now be banned. Confidentiality of sources, which is a fundamental pillar of independent journalism, is now under question. It must be stated clearly that all this cannot be the way to move forward, and it was not why the people made so much sacrifice.

Let me recall a conversation I had with former prime minister Khaleda Zia immediately after her second election victory in 2001 (she stopped meeting editors after that). There were hundreds of us as more party cadres than genuine journalists attended that occasion. During a moment when I was able to step near her chair I said, "Prime Minister, never lose your faith in and patience with the independent media even if it criticises you, especially if it criticises you. Because when you are in power there is none to tell you the truth except the independent media. And if you never know the truth you will inevitably fail." I could say it because at that time the independent media was her favourite due to our role against the previous government's misgovernance. Soon all that changed and the rest is history, of which we are all victims.

Though this caretaker government has been in power for a much shorter time, it is still a government. Like every government it will handle power. Wherever there is power, there is the chance of abuse of power. Wherever there is abuse of power there is corruption. So who will tell the chief adviser about that abuse of power and of corruption in his own administration and by those who pretend to support it, but us. Even if his advisers are all honourable men and women, and they are, what about the hundreds of thousands of functionaries on whom Dr Fakhruddin has to depend and who

will carry out his government's policies and orders. Some of these functionaries are the very people who partook of the corruption of the past government, and of the government before that, and so on. Will they suddenly turn saints? If not, then who will give the government the unvarnished truth about them? So when we are restricted or gagged, it is the government that deprives itself of the truth and genuine information on which a government's success depends. So Dr Fakhruddin must understand that by gagging the free media, he is setting a trap for himself for the end that has been the inevitable fate of all governments that restrict the flow of information.

We recall the chief adviser's own speech that inspired the whole nation. It did so, among other things, for his repeated commitment to fundamental rights and to freedom of the media. Therefore we urge this caretaker government and especially its chief not to throw away the tremendous support, public confidence and international goodwill it enjoys. Since it is not an elected government, public confidence and support are its main strength, which comes from openness, accountability and transparency. Whoever heard of all these without a free and independent media? Need we say more?

Lankan navy

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also been sunk.

Residents reported hearing gunfire near the southern end of the port's high security zone.

"We don't know how many people were in the rebel boats, but the navy confirmed they destroyed all three which were headed towards the port," a police official said.

Tamil Tigers staged a kamikaze-style seaborne attack against the southern naval port of Galle in October, killing a sailor and a civilian and damaging several naval craft. Rebels entered the Colombo port in April 1996, damaging foreign ships with rocket-propelled grenades, but the guerrilla craft was blown out of the water by port security men before they could cause major damage.

In July 2001, the Tigers staged an even bigger attack on the island's only international airport near here, destroying six civilian jets on the tarmac and blowing up over a dozen military aircraft parked at the adjoining airbase.

Since then, the authorities have clamped tight security on all ports in the island and banned fishing nearby to prevent guerrillas mingling among fishermen to stage attacks.

Police said there was confusion on Saturday because authorities had also planned security manoeuvres, with many believing the firing was part of a drill.

Tight security at the port was further stepped up with the employees allowed in after a thorough search, they said.

The incident came after the military captured the main rebel bastion of Vakarai in the island's east and stepped up operations against pockets of rebel resistance in the region.

Police also raised security in the island's south on Friday fearing revenge attacks, a police official said adding that 38 people were detained for questioning.

More than 3,800 people have been killed in the past year in escalating violence despite a truce that has been in place since February 2002. Norwegian-backed peace talks ended in failure in October.

The island's drawn-out Tamil separatist conflict, led by the LTTE, has claimed over 60,000 lives in the past 35 years and political attempts to resolve the conflict have ended in failure.

minority Sunni sect. **VIOLENCE UNRELENTING**

US forces killed 14 insurgents in an air strike early yesterday in an area near Baghdad where Sunni insurgents are battling Iraqi government and US troops.

The US military said the air strike was launched after some militants had tried to escape troops closing in on them.

Despite Maliki's announcement earlier this month of a new offensive to regain control of Baghdad's streets from sectarian death squads, violence has continued unabated, with militants defiantly continuing to kill scores of people every week.

Gunmen dressed in police commando uniforms abducted eight people from a central Baghdad computer store on Saturday in the latest mass kidnapping to hit the Iraqi capital, police said.

Gunmen dragged out employees from the store, situated on a main road, and bundled them into waiting cars. There had been a relative lull in such mass abductions in recent weeks.