

## Polls only after basic reforms

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Kamal and Yasmeen Murshed, Awami League (AL) leader Tofail Ahmed, former law minister Moudud Ahmed, Shujan Secretar Badul 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 Sharmin Murshed of Brotook 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 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-ur-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

At the discussions 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 has 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 Murshed proposed formation of an "election disqualification commission" with this power.

Asif Nazrul proposed cutting off 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

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-ur-Alam. The EC must be strong enough to be tough on the electoral rules violators including those who submit false statements, he noted.

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