

The matador

Turnaround time for voter registration has been estimated at 20 to 25 minutes per voter. If you do the math for 90 million people to be registered by 12,000 units where each registration process takes 25 minutes, it will take more than 20 months just to register the voters. If you include procurement time, training, printing of lists, logistics and holidays this time frame can reach up to 28 months to complete the entire project.

MAHBOOB UR RAHMAN

INTERESTINGLY, the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) in his recent interview compared our upcoming parliamentary election to a Spanish bullfight. I presume that the CEC is playing the role of, el matador, or a bull-fighter fighting this deadly game, where he has to be fully prepared before he steps into the arena to face the bull and he must show good performance and avoid deadly mistakes to win the fight.

Unfortunately our matador is not prepared even after four months to enter into the arena as he is very careful not to make any mistake that can leave him scarred for life. But I am glad that Election Commission (EC) finally realized that traditional method of door-to-door voter registration is not feasible as they have to carry around all the digital data collection equipment like laptops, finger-print scanners, and cameras.

However, political parties believe that voter listing from camps will not

work and urged EC to reconsider the collection of data from door to door. Surely, the camp-based voter listing will end up administratively disenfranchise many people, especially conservative rural women and elderly from their right to vote due to distance and long registration process.

Similarly, door-to-door voter registration may leave out the ever increasing mobile and homeless population in major cities like Dhaka and Chittagong. Although, EC believes that with proper campaign through political parties, NGOs and other mediums it would be possible to bring people to camps to register but it is yet to be proven.

There are clear advantages and disadvantages of both door-to-door and camp based voter registration. Thus this unique situation in the country demands a unique and pragmatic solution where we can use a hybrid solution using all the option of door-to-door and camp-based registry using both manual and digital method.

After going through several proposals from BASIS, BUET, Bangladesh army, and other organizations, EC now came to a decision to deploy 12,000 teams equipped with laptops, document scanners, finger-print scanners and web-cams to registration stations all across the country. Turnaround time for voter registration has been estimated at 20 to 25 minutes per voter.

If you do the math for 90 million people to be registered by 12,000 units where each registration process takes 25 minutes, it will take more than 20 months just to register the voters. If you include procurement time, training, printing of lists, logistics and holidays this time frame can reach up to 28 months to complete the entire project.

It seems that EC is more concerned about the hardware and technology that will be used in the registration process rather than finding an optimized process and right technology for registration. What we need here is to see an optimized voter registration process and

methodology where we can bring the turn around time for each voter to complete registration in 5 to 10 minutes using least number of equipment and manpower possible.

Before suggesting a workable solution for voter registration, I would like to make following points that needs to be considered in light of current decision by EC and demand by the political parties:

Digital picture: Using web-cam is not at all desirable as the whole purpose of the web-cam is to do video conferencing and not take quality pictures. Instead good quality digital cameras with flash and tripod are required for the job. There should be a methodology of taking picture with white background and proper lighting condition so that picture taken can be clearly printed and later be used for identifying the voters.

Fingerprint: It is not clear why EC would want to take fingerprint scans of the voters if these fingerprints will not be crossed matched for duplicates. In order to cross match the fingers you need AFIS, an expensive solution for fingerprint verification and matching. If EC plans to match 1 to many or 1:n fingerprints, what is the number for "n"? If you are matching fingerprint for each voter with the rest of the 90 million voters then the time required for finding match will be extremely long and may not be feasible.

Data entry resources: Large number of data entry resources skilled in Bangla typing will be very challenging to hire and to deploy them all over Bangladesh for only 18 months.

Database and security: As we are relying on digital data for the registration, we need to ensure proper database security and disaster recovery planning. How will the data be transferred to the national data center from the camp location? How can the database be secured so that it cannot be manipulated or corrupted.

Turn around time: 20 to 25 minutes for each registration to complete is far too long and many voters, specially peasants and laborers may not have the time or patience to wait that long just for the registration purpose. It should be made simple and brought down to 5 to 10 minutes.

Inclusiveness: Is this new registration process inclusive, that is, how accessible is it to all groups and categories of eligible citizens. Are we not administratively excluding voters such as women and elderly by setting up camps for registration where they have travel long distance from their home and how will laborers invest in times that they don't have.

Keeping above points in mind, we can think afresh to look for a hybrid solution that will allow registration of all types of voters such as rural people, mobile population of the cities, homeless and even handicapped people. EC can look into following

suggestion to incorporate them into their planning:

- Instead of deploying 12,000 teams armed with laptops and other gadgets to camps or door-to-door, EC should consider deploying 12,000 teams with pre-printed unique application forms with bar-code, digital camera with flash, tripod and white backdrop.
- After collecting voter information and photographs from the field, each EC team will return to Union or Thana data centre to upload the pictures taken during that day and scan the corresponding applications to the computer. Later a customized computer application can search and integrate the picture with the scanned application through background matchmaking process using the bar code. At this point data entry can be done directly from the scanned form or send it to the central head quarter for outsourcing data entry service.
- Under this process voters do not have to wait around for data entry operators to enter their data into computer and this process is done in parallel while other mobile teams are busy collecting data in phases.
- Here process of data gathering, data entry, validation and printing is broken down and each process can be staggered throughout the country and can be done in parallel to save time.
- Once the data reaches the central



database in the national datacentre, it will go for printing voter list with pictures through an automated digital press.

The biggest challenge for voter registration in 2007 will be inclusion of voters' photographs during the registration process. Only systematic and clearly identified processes utilizing modern technology can ensure a proper voter registration. The CEC has rightly compared this

election to the Spanish bullfight and he cannot afford to make any mistake nor does he have any time for experiments to win this fight. He has to make sure that the processes and technology chosen for the voter registration is practical and fool-proof.

Mahboobur Rahman is an IT professional.

Frequently asked questions to people who criticize the CTG Hyderabad blast: Wake up call for secular India

We speak out because we love our country and the people who serve our country honourably. Our cheering and our finger pointing is driven by the government actions and it is all because of a common interest of seeing what is best for our dear homeland named Bangladesh. Just one request: please don't term us "anti-state" because the government won't like what we say. Stopping the information flow is not the way to deal with criticism but rather by changing the minds with transparent actions, one can convert the people from being critics to cheerleaders.

ASIF SALEH

Q. Are you better off than you were 6 months ago?

A. Depends on whom you ask. The slum dwellers who got evicted, or the 150,000 people who are in the jail without charges, are not. But people perhaps are happy in general with the political stability, with a new hope that the days of politics as usual are over.

Q. Are you happy that some of those people who thought Bangladesh was their own property have been thrown in jail?

A. Absolutely. No well-intentioned person will oppose any anti-corruption drive.

Q. Are you seeing a more hands-on, pro-active, government with good and capable advisers?

A. We like the advisers who talk less and work more. We are happy with some of the announcements, and now we want to see them implemented.

Q. Then why are you complaining?

A. Like everybody else, we see this as a tremendous chance to fix the democratic institutions and set ourselves for the future. We also strongly believe in democracy, more than in any other system in the world. We believe in democracy based on strong democratic institutions, and

not the election-only democracy that was practiced during the last 15 years.

We are complaining because we have high hopes from this government, and we want it to succeed in delivering a truly meaningful, free and fair election in Bangladesh. We are not complaining only, we are also applauding some of the more challenging tasks that this government has taken on. The path that the nation is walking on is a treacherous one. Steps in the right direction will take us forward a long way, but the slightest mis-step will let the opportunists take us back many years. We are worried when we see some dangerous trends.

Q. Why are you worried? Isn't the government doing what you asked them to do pre-January 11?

A. We are worried that the practice of making a mockery of our judicial institutions continues. We are worried that due process is not being followed in capturing the accused. We are worried because we see not enough care in actually filing proper charges with solid investigation against the corrupt.

We are worried that if such trends continue, then it is only a matter of time before similar bending of rules and breaking of promises will happen in the future, which we will not like. We are worried when we see that the murder of Mandi activist Chalesh

Richil remains unaccounted for.

We are worried when we see such human rights abuses and extra judicial killings continue like before. We are worried because we expected a lot better from this government, whose claim to legitimacy is its moral high ground.

Q. Why are you worried about military getting involved in politics?

A. Perhaps there was no way, other than the military getting involved, to break the deadlock in January 11. But military out of the barrack for a prolonged period of time has never brought out anything good in the past and can never bring anything good in the future.

We risk losing the last institute that is known for its efficiency and perceived as trust worthy by the people. Let the military help the caretaker government and return to the barrack. They are here to help the government to do a job -- let them do it. Let them go back after that. Imagine what a wonderful image the army will set for the rest of country and the world by doing this. This is also the announced intention of the army.

Q. Why do people bring in the example by Pakistan?

A. Trends point to the fact that a similar experiment like that of Gen. Musharraf is being tried in



Bangladesh. Gen Musharraf govt is falling apart without bringing in any meaningful change in Pakistan's future in the last eight years. There is no reason to believe that this experiment will be successful in Bangladesh.

Q. So where do you stand?

A. We are happy that in the short term accountability is being brought to our institutes and they are being depoliticized. We are happy that in the short term steps are taken to mitigate the corruption. We are happy the election reform proposals are being discussed.

But we are worried that such short term measures without systemic changes will not get us to our journey

towards forward looking society with social justice. We are worried when we see too many press comments and very little implementation.

We are worried that the civil society is giving blank checks to a group without realizing the long-term implication of it. We are worried that the representative of the people, the political parties, are not in the process of discussing electoral reforms. Any attempt to quick fixes can bring short-term cheer but no meaningful long-term impact. We will only have to wait till someone else comes to power and bends the rule to their convenience.

Let's fix the election rules, bring democracy inside the parties, and make election commission inde-

pendent. We will then be on our path to democracy that is accountable and meaningful. With the absence of a parliament, civic society has a greater role to play here. Until then it is very important not to give a few good men the power to do anything and everything in the name of anti-corruption.

We don't want to go back to the era of pre January 11 dysfunctional democracy -- even more we don't want to go back to the military era of the 1980s when similar talk of anti-corruption was followed by limitless corruption by a new interest group.

We want to go to a path of functional democracy, which will deliver for the people. When we see the government move away from that path and indulge in the very same practice that they accuse their predecessors of doing, we want to keep a sharp look and criticize where necessary.

We speak out because we love our country and the people who serve our country honourably. Our cheering and our finger pointing is driven by the government actions and it is all because of a common interest of seeing what is best for our dear homeland named Bangladesh.

Just one request: please don't term us "anti-state" because the government won't like what we say. Stopping the information flow is not the way to deal with criticism but rather by changing the minds with transparent actions, one can convert the people from being critics to cheerleaders.

Asif Saleh is a contributor to the Drishtipat Writers' Collective and founder of Drishtipat.

Deaths in Rajshahi hospital

I am just hoping against hope that this "high-powered" government will make a note of it and do the needful for a proper inquiry into the matter, including Rab's role in it. For the moment, I expect, and am waiting to see, the advisors comment on this. I also wait to see when an elected government makes healthcare issues a priority. Finally, I wait to for the media to take a pro-people stand.

MAHMUDUL SUMON

MANY patients were seen leaving the hospital yesterday morning after failing to receive any care as four patients had died without any medical care earlier between 12:00 am and 6:30 am. Sima died at around 6:20am"

I write this note with a heavy heart. So forgive me if I sound emotional. In fact, I write about a news report which I could not read till the end. I cannot believe that for one distressed person's mistakenly taken move (I do not want to know what it is, after all this person's wife was seriously ill), interns who would soon be doctors, can

refuse their professional responsibility of saving lives.

I simply cannot believe that others, including support staffs in this Rajshahi hospital could actually support such a move. I cannot simply believe my eyes that I am reading this news, looking at this picture of the family The Daily Star has courageously printed.

What was Shahabul's fault, after all? Does that require a lot of explanation? He must have asked for more care or more attention for his wife. He must have tried to convince the doctors that his wife was very ill. He must have been a worried man. What else could have happened there?

Shahabul, the prison guard, whom

I assume have very little financial abilities, must have pleaded for all this. What else could he do? He did not have the money and support to get his wife admitted in a private hospital. He came to the state-run hospital for treatment. This is what millions of people would do in Bangladesh.

But, instead of treatment for his wife, he was physically assaulted. It's a shame. The fact that for his behaviour the interns have physically assaulted him is unthinkable and unacceptable. But it is as if that was not enough! These interns actually waited for the controversial Rab officials to come over and do the rest.

What a fine solidarity! Then why blame Rab all the time? It look like we

have so many Rab allies in our society. And Rab with a fine demonstration of power, lives up to their expectation: "Rab members knocked Shahabul to the ground and beat him up mercilessly," (according to eye-witnesses) says the report.

This happens in the afternoon in RMCH. By next morning four patients, including Sima, Shahabul's wife, dies. Four lives are gone -- just gone. So simple? So easy? How could these interns let this happen? I really want to see the names of these doctors. Who are they? Where do they belong? What are they made of?

I want their pictures in the newspapers. What do they look like? Really, I cannot hold myself today. My questions are simple: This must not go unnoticed by the government if that term at all means anything. Immediate inquirers should be made and these should look into the following questions: Who are the instigators of this "strike" against the patients? What are their motives? Where were

the higher authorities of the hospital during that time? What were they doing at the moment when this alleged spat between Shahabul and the interns was taking place?

I have no words for Shahabul and his children. I don't know who is going to take responsibility for these deaths which took place under the negligence of a government-run hospital. Here, in UK, which I have made my temporary home, I get this impression that, despite there being huge economic divides (i.e. rich being far more rich and poor being far more poor in recent decades) there are a certain services which are state run and a lot of effort is being made to make it perfect.

Ones such service is the NHS, the National Health Service, which provides healthcare throughout UK. I have seen repeatedly on television how ordinary citizens would even reprimand the prime minister (in this case it is the outgoing Tony Blair) as a way of complaint about the NHS

service and how the media would air these footages repeatedly. This makes the politicians very focused on these sensitive issues.

The incoming prime minister, Gordon Brown, has NHS as one of his biggest priorities. I know that it may not be very smart to make a comparison at this moment but I cannot help looking at the situation of our hospitals in Bangladesh.

I am just hoping against hope that this "high-powered" government will make a note of it and do the needful for a proper inquiry into the matter, including Rab's role in it. For the moment, I expect, and am waiting to see, the advisors comment on this. I also wait to see when an elected government makes healthcare issues a priority. Finally, I wait to for the media to take a pro-people stand.

Postscript: Another five people have died before this piece was submitted.

Mahmudul Sumon teaches anthropology in JU, Bangladesh. He is currently doing Ph.D. at University of Kent, UK.

BOBBY RAMAKANT

THE people of secular sovereign India have stood strong and more resolved to peace and amity, even at the wake of repeated attacks on religious places. These have only exposed the nefarious designs of a handful of those behind these terror attacks. Undoubtedly these repeated acts of terror have put us through one of the gravest tests of courage, patience, commitment to peace and humane social order.

Another attempt to thwart the communal harmony in India was made on Friday, May 18 when a crude RDX bomb exploded near the historic Mecca Mosque in Hyderabad. Apart from that, there were two live bombs recovered from the spot and defused.

There have been repeated attempts to instigate different religious communities in the past.

Two explosions that took place in quick succession inside the historic Jama Masjid in Old Delhi when the devout were offering prayers on a Friday evening of April 2006. The first explosion took place at around 5.30 pm, when devotees were preparing for Asar (evening prayer) near a pond used by them for ablutions.

Syed Ahmed Bukhari, the Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid, had then made an appeal to the people of India to "maintain communal harmony and to defeat the designs of those who want to disrupt the peaceful co-existence between Hindus and Muslims."

On the eve of 2005 Diwali, bomb blasts went off in Sarojini Nagar market, Paharganj and a bus in Kalkaji area of Delhi, killing more than 50 people.

Ajay Sahani, Terrorism Expert of Institute of Conflict Management, had then said: "It is clear that objective was to incite violence within the country. But the good thing about today's event and the event in Varanasi [blast at the temple and railway station] was that people were not reacting in frenzy and people behind the blasts were not succeeding."

Similar sentiments reinforcing secular feelings were expressed. Even media restrained and demonstrated sensitive and responsible journalism, in the wake of ugly events of terror and strife.

An overwhelming majority of people in India have realized the

vested interests of handful of those who mastermind these terror attacks on religious institutions and thankfully have refused to be instigated by them. By not spewing venom and hatred, we have made the efforts unsuccessful of those who pull the terror-trigger.

Home Secretary Madhukar Gupta reviewed the national security situation in the wake of the bomb explosion at the Mecca Masjid in Hyderabad during Friday prayers.

Steps were taken to ensure that the communal violence, which erupted in some parts of Andhra Pradesh, does not spill over to other parts of the country.

The Indian Home Ministry has alerted all the state governments to be vigilant about the anti-social elements seeking to use the Mecca Masjid incident to whip up communal passion and create disturbances to upset peace and harmony.

Noted social activist and Magsaysay awardee Dr. Sandeep Pandey said that: "Despite of piercing ache in our hearts, we feel all the more committed to make the voices of the majority heard majority of us hindus and muslims don't want violence and hatred between people, there is a small minority of people indulging in acts of violence and terror, and they don't represent us."

Few people have been resorting to such brutal ways to invoke undue hatred and anguish, and undoubtedly cause an irrevocable loss of human life.

We also believe that our response in this grim and sad hour of grief should not be of hatred and revenge -- rather our commitments to peace and non-violence should be as determined as possible. The perpetrators of violence want to invoke hatred, we must be resolute to not yield to their demands. This is the time to test our steely resolve - to peace, love and harmonious co-existence.

I consider it as a wake up call for the secular India, and we have been ignoring the blaring sirens for long. The struggle to establish a just social and humane order, impacting the lives of most underserved communities, is indeed a long one. It is the time for all of us to dawn our often-neglected roles of being a responsible citizen of secular India as well.

Bobby Ramakant is a senior health and development journalist, writing for newspapers in Asia, Africa and Middle East.