

We want election the soonest but ...

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ELECTION seems to have become the main focus of the nation now. The Awami League, especially party chief Sheikh Hasina, wants election to be held soonest possible, which means, it should not take more than six months to prepare the voter list with photographs, after which the election should be held.

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leaders also want election at the earliest, before all its tainted leaders are hunted down, tried and punished. Uncle Sam, too, seems to be putting pressure for early election, perhaps because he does not want to see AL and BNP thoroughly cleaned of their rotten eggs and reduced to a rump.

If we have a corruption free democratic polity, then America will have very little ground to lecture us on why it wants speedy election without necessary reforms. The EU has also lately voiced support for election before the time frame announced by the Election Commission (EC).

Sheikh Hasina is becoming increasingly critical of the caretaker government (CTG). She is accusing the CTG of "wasting time in the name of reforms." Earlier, she said that the CTG's constitutional basis was weak. But she was the most jubilant when the present CTG was sworn into power. She is now interested only in election, and not in reforms, because she wants to capture power.

Of course, we all want election to be held the soonest possible in order to get back to the system of governance of the country by a democratically elected government. But the election must necessarily be free and fair, and reflect the hopes and aspirations of the

people.

And that is not all. The election must be such that it brings about a qualitative change for the better, as far as the men and women to be elected members of the parliament are concerned. Fair election means nothing whatsoever if the political thugs, the criminals and their god fathers, the "tainted" former ministers, state ministers and members of parliament, and the nouveau riche who suddenly acquired political and social space grossly disproportionate to their legitimate income and became owners of fabulous wealth and property -- multi storied shopping complexes, private TV channels, banks, chains of industries etc, are the ones the people have to choose from for electing their representative in the parliament.

Fair and free election means damn all if the same corrupt, inept; power hungry and unscrupulous political leadership again manages to climb back to power as the new government following the election. So, free and fair election means nothing if we do not bring about meaningful electoral and political reforms, and punish those who only exploited the people and plundered and looted the wealth and property of the state and in the process, sullied the good name of this country.

We need reforms to bring about transparency and accountability in the conduct of our parliamentarians and ministers. We need reforms to ensure that henceforth not a single member of parliament will boycott parliament on political grounds and make it dysfunctional without paying the penalty of not being entitled to pay and allowances and all other perks and privileges for the period of absenteeism.

We need reforms to slam the door of our august parliament

house on the corrupt and the criminals. All these reforms will take time. We have a God sent opportunity to expect a truly free and fair election, now that a military backed CTG is in place, which can, by and large, boast of being not only neutral but national as well in its outlook and conduct.

The AL and the BNP fought each other tooth and nail on the streets till the other day over the issue of the January 22 defunct election. The AL opposing and resisting the holding of election unless essential electoral and other related reforms packages were in place, and BNP adamant on holding the election on the dot as per constitution, sans any reforms whatsoever.

Both have seemingly closed their ranks and are demanding that election be held as early as possible. They both fear that by the time voter list with photographs is prepared, and the necessary reforms are in place, many of their party leaders with track records of corruption and criminal offences will have been hounded, tried and put behind bars, which will rob them of the whip hand in the upcoming election.

As days progress into a month and months into a year, both AL and BNP, the main two contenders for political power, have much to lose and very little to gain. With the EC and the Anti Corruption Commission (ACC) now asserting their authority and expressing their resolve and commitment to play their due role, there is every possibility that much of the dirty linen of AL and BNP will be washed in public by the CTG, and much of the advantage they had been enjoying in the past as major political parties will fritter away as well.

This may facilitate the coming into being of a third political force

in our politics -- something like the LDP and Gono Forum, and other progressive political entities, welded into a grand political alliance which can offer itself as a credible alternative to both AL and BNP, forcing the latter to introduce democratic reforms in their parties.

The haste with which AL and BNP would like to proceed with election is understandable. But the mood of the people and the civil society, as evident from TV talk shows and public reactions shown on TV channels across the country, is totally different. They want the political debris and scum to be cleared from the political arena, and necessary reforms duly effected to guard against any elected government ever trying to rig election and stay in power after having failed to deliver.

They do not want to hear any more hollow promises of democracy and development from our political leaders. They do not want to see the parliament being used for slandering rival political leaders or being rendered dysfunctional, as they were wont to see over the last sixteen years.

They want reforms not only to strengthen the democratic character and contours of our national and public institutions but also to insulate these organizations against any possible threat of ever becoming vehicles of political and partisan influence.

The CTG has done a splendid job by reconstituting the EC and the ACC. Those who lead these national institutions are all men of honour whom we are all proud of. We feel the same way about the new chairman of the Public Service Commission (PSC).

But can we guarantee that men and women with such impeccable integrity and credentials will continue to lead these institutions in



future, once elected political governments come to power, unless the rules and regulations governing the system of appointment of those who are going to lead these organizations are amended suitably? This is the sort of reforms the CTG must embark upon and pursue as its agenda of reforms.

A national commission can be set up to suggest how well we can democratize the system of appointment of men and women who are going to lead and run the affairs of the national and public institutions, including the University Grants Commission, various university syndicates etc, in line with practice in western democracies like the US and UK.

This CTG can rightly boast of



some phenomenal achievements in the just over three months time since it came to power. It has done what no elected government could do in the whole of its tenure. It has recovered Tk.2323 crore of outstanding utility bills, and Tk 320.5 crore of the money siphoned abroad. It has recovered 14,187 acres of government land, which was illegally grabbed by the corrupt political elites and their cronies during the rule of the past elected governments.

Besides,

the overall performance of the Chittagong Port has shown remarkable improvement. A ship's average turn around time has been reduced, and the number of containers handled per day has

increased significantly. Against the backdrop of these achievements, the CTG can look forward to holding a credible election in minimum possible time.

Meanwhile, the political parties, particularly AL and BNP, the civil society, the intelligentsia, the media and the people at large should cooperate with the CTG and the EC in their task of implementing the essential reforms proposals and laying out a level playing field for all the political parties, big and small, to participate in the next election. Let us not hurry through the election to put a particular party in power, because this will spell disaster for the country.

Let the CTG and the EC take

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