Free and fair?

Badiul Alam Majumdar looks at the effects of money, muscle and influence on elections in Bangladesh

DEMOCRACY is rule by the consent of the people. Elections are the only means to attain that consent. In fact, it is the only non-violent and civilised means of transferring governmental powers. Thus, elections are a prerequisite for a democratic polity. However, merely holding periodic elections does not establish democracy -- they must be free, fair and meaningful. Elections are free and fair only if they are not manipulated by money, muscle and official influence. They are meaningful only if free and fair elections lead to improvement in the quality of elected representatives and, consequently, governance. Unfortunately, money, muscle and official influence played important roles in Bangladesh's elections over the years, and this incresingly lowered the quality of our elected leaders.

Effects of money

In Bangladesh, money influences elections in several important ways. One obvious and widely prevalent use of money is the buying of nominations from established political parties. This seedy act is known as *mononoyan banijya* or "nomination trade." Candidates often pay huge sums of money to party bosses, and sometimes to several leaders of the party. At times, larger parties engage in bidding wars for forming electoral alliances with smaller parties.

Obtaining nominations by paying bribes to party leaders has become a widespread practice in Bangladesh in recent years. It is alleged that, prior to the election that was scheduled to be held last January 22 but was cancelled, Awami League nominations in 50 seats were sold for a minimum of Tk. 5 crore to a maximum of Tk. 20 crore each, resulting in illegal transfers of huge sums of money (*Prothom Alo*, January 14, 2007). Thus, in the past, through such nomination trade, many corrupt businessmen and black money owners became Members of Parliament (MPs), making this august institution a sort of club of many unsavoury characters.

There are also serious allegations of illegal inter-party transfers of huge sums of money prior to the cancelled elections of January 2007. It is alleged that Awami League agreed to pay Tk 60-70 crore, of which Tk. 3.5 crore was paid as advance, to bring General Ershad's Jatiyo Party into the fold of the 14-party grand alliance. On the other

